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The
Weakest
manga
Villainess
wants her
Freedom!



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Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Elle of the Four Grand Magi](#)

[Chapter 2: Magic Sanctum Invasion Strategy](#)

[Chapter 3: A New Start](#)

[Interlude: Laurent of the Desolated Village](#)

[Chapter 4: The Village Overrun by Magic Particles](#)

[Chapter 5: Welcome to Elle Village!](#)

[Interlude: The Daily Life of the Current Fourth-Ranked Analian Grand Magi,
Clark](#)

[Chapter 6: The Seigneur's Messenger](#)

[Chapter 7: Saint Aela's Party](#)

[Chapter 8: The Four Grand Magi of the Demon Lord's Army](#)

[Interlude: Julius's Wish](#)

[Chapter 9: Captured Elle](#)

[Chapter 10: A Discussion about the Truth](#)

[Chapter 11: A Moment in Elle Village](#)

[Interlude: A Certain Woman's Crafty Spell](#)

[Chapter 12: The Road to the Inner Sanctum](#)

[Chapter 13: Clark's Impetus](#)

[Chapter 14: In a Weathered World](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[After Story: Elle Village's Grand Sorceress Mayor Wants to Wreak Havoc in
Gaea](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

The Weakest Manga Villainess Wants Her Freedom!

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The Weakest Manga Villainess Wants Her Freedom!

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Act 1: Demon Lord Kingdom Analia

Chapter 1: Elle of the Four Grand Magi

WHAT a marvelous day!

The final volume to my absolute favorite *shoujo* manga, *Saint Aela of Gaea*, comes out today! As a longtime fan of the series since its debut, I've been impatiently awaiting the ending.

The second the bookstore door slides open, I sweep in and purchase my copy before anyone else. I race outside, unable to contain my excitement.

I wanna read it now! I gotta know how it ends! I mean, it's the final volume! Will Aela defeat the Demon Lord? Who will she end up with? The prince, like I've been assuming? Or maybe one of the former Four Grand Magi of the Demon Lord's Army...

As I'm preoccupied thinking over all the ways the series can end... *Bam!* I hear a loud crash.

Huh? What just happened? Why do I feel like I'm floating? Is that a truck in front of me? Was that the sound of me being hit by a truck? Oh. Crap.

Those are my final thoughts right before I black out.



SOMEONE else's memories suddenly flood my brain. My mind reels out of control from the overwhelming deluge of information pouring in, bringing me to my knees.

Nngh! What are these visions? Me? Are these my...my...

"Lady Elle! Are you all right?!" one of the maids asks, supporting me before I fall on my face.

Elle? That's right. My name is...Elle. But for some reason, I have someone else's memories, too... Are they from a past life?

The memories of another woman whose occupation was “senior high school student” are stirring together with mine.

I look up with a start and press the maid for an answer. “Hey, who am I?! Tell me!”

“Pardon me, milady? Why do you need to know that...?”

“Just answer me already!”

“Y-Yes, milady! You are Lady Elle Falmil Gracedane, one of the esteemed members of the Four Grand Magi of the Analian army!”

That’s right! I’m Elle, right?!

Regaining my confidence, I puff out my chest that doesn’t have much to push out in the first place and put a hand on my hip.

“That’s right! I am Elle! I rose to the rank of Grand Magi in the Demon Lord’s Army at the age of fifteen, the youngest ever to achieve that rank in the history of Analia! I love the Demon Lord the most! And the Demon Lord loves me most! Yeah, that’s right. I’m...” I manage to rattle on enthusiastically until astonishment stops me short.

Right, I am Elle.

And this is Analia, the Demon Lord’s kingdom.

“Hey, you. Gaea is the name of the neighboring country, right?” I ask the maid just to be sure. The maid nods with a curious look, as if she’s wondering why I’m asking her a known fact and if this is some sort of test.

Another wave of dizziness hits me.

All of this... It’s just like...!

The memories of my past life spiral into my thoughts, becoming one with them.

The peculiar world from my past life is drastically different from this one. Practically everything here is different, from how people think about things to what’s considered common sense.

Those past memories are crowded with scenes from a certain manga.

That's right. They're scenes from the manga I had adored in my past life: *Saint Aela of Gaea*.

And I'm filled with despair as I recall its plot.

Was I reborn into the world of Saint Aela of Gaea...? Analia and Gaea—the names match exactly with the manga, including mine.

The armed forces of Analia go by the name Demon Lord's Army. And I'm Elle Falmil Gracedane, one of the Four Grand Magi who rule over that army. Everything is exactly the same as the manga, including the relationship between the two countries!

Saint Aela of Gaea is the story of Saint Aela, a girl who fights to protect her home, the Kingdom of Gaea, from Analia, a country full of sorcerers where those with power reign supreme.

Despite having been just a normal girl, Aela uses her awakened saintly powers to defeat the bad guys and save the day. And of course, being from a *shoujo* manga, heart-racing scenes with the cast of good-looking male characters are a huge piece of the story. It was a super-interesting series!

I'm dying to know how the final volume ends.

How could my past self have been such a dummy to die before reading it?! Klutz!

But wait.

If I'm Elle, doesn't that make me the first Grand Magi that Saint Aela defeats?

When Elle is beaten, the other three Grand Magi say:

"So, it seems that imbecile Elle was vanquished."

"Heh heh heh. She was the weakest of us Grand Magi."

"She disgraces the title of Grand Magi to have been killed by someone from Gaea."

Doesn't that make me the pathetic character whose early death is mocked?!

"U-Um, are you...truly feeling all right...Lady Elle?" The worried maid takes a good look at my face.

Right. That's right. I need to calm down first... Besides, I still have time. Time before the battle with Saint Aela! I don't want to be mocked as the disgrace of the Grand Magi on top of being killed off!

I nod to set her mind at ease. Now I'm curious why my past life's memories suddenly flooded my mind. If I remember correctly, the maid and I were discussing who the Demon Lord had selected as my fiancé...

That's it...!

"Hey, you. Didn't you tell me the name of my fiancé a few minutes ago? Say it again," I order.

"A-Again? A-As you command, milady. Grand Magi Julius Eldorad Griffith has been chosen as your fiancé."

Yet another wave of dizziness strikes me.

Actually, I'm already on the floor.

How could I not?! I mean, Grand Magi Julius Eldorad Griffith is the jerk who will say "She disgraces the title of Grand Magi to have been killed by someone from Gaea" when I die!

Upon learning this shocking backstory from the manga, my inner fangirl cries out *That jerk was Elle's fiancé! Who knew!* right before I black out.



THINK about this calmly. Now's not the time for panic.

I slowly sit up in bed and suck in a deep breath. It was just yesterday that I passed out after being hit by a volley of outrageous facts. Taking measured breaths calms my racing mind a bit. I pick up the gold hand mirror from the side table and stare long and hard at my reflection.

Glittering red eyes, long red hair.

Reflected in the mirror is a beautiful, bright-eyed girl who appears younger than her fifteen years. I'm looking at the spitting image of the weakest boss in *Saint Aela of Gaea*.

Elle is the short-tempered villainess with a *loli* character design, and the first

Grand Magi to be killed by the manga heroine.

“How could I, the greatest sorceress and Grand Magi, be defeated at your measly hands?!” she bemoans like a typical villain before being offed by Saint Aela and her party.

Hell no...! I don't wanna end up like that!

I know! Maybe I can get by without drawing Saint Aela's attention...if I behave myself? That's a decent thought, until I think back on all the things I've done until today. Uh, yeah, that ship has sailed. I shake my head.

I mean...I've already done plenty of things that warrant being killed.

Amid my despair, I hear a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I say with a start, and the maid who helped me yesterday enters the room.

She looks so nervous you'd think she was standing before her executioner. She jumps and trembles when our eyes meet.

Nervous sweat coats my hands as I squeeze them tight.

“...Don't be so scared.”

The words come out bossy despite how freaked out I feel about the maid.

Sounding arrogant is already a habit I can't shake.

That proves it. I'm doomed to shout a clichéd villain line like “How could I, the greatest sorceress and best of the Grand Magi, be defeated at your measly hands?!” even if I'm shaking in my boots.

The maid gapes at me for a brief moment before carrying over the tea set and prepping a cup of black tea for me.

“...Thanks,” I say, causing the maid to stiffen.

I bet she's shocked because I said something so very unlike me.

This maid— Actually, not just this maid, but all the servants serving in my manor are frightened of me. No, frightened isn't all—they *should* hate me, too.

I mean, I did kidnap them from Gaea and force them to work for me.

Blessed with an enormous supply of magic from birth, I deluded myself into thinking the Demon Lord loved me most, and was always delighted to do whatever it took to make him love me even more. I believed that living in the dominion ruled by the Demon Lord, and by the perfect laws he created, was the most wonderful, blissful thing in the world.

That's why I frequently wandered into Gaea to bring people home with me as my servants so they could live in Analia. I truly believed that the people I whisked away would be happier this way.

I did it all out of the goodness of my heart!

I thought living here was the epitome of happiness and wanted others to enjoy living in the Demon Lord's blissful land, so I abducted people, with the conviction that I was doing a good thing.

Blindly hanging on the Demon Lord's every word, I sneered at Gaea and ridiculed them for being fools to resist the Demon Lord Army's invasion. All because I had this delusion there was no greater joy in life than to live under the Demon Lord's rule.

But once I gained memories from my past life, and once the logic and moral values from that world permeated my mind, it hit me like a ton of bricks: my good intentions were foolish acts that ruined lives.

The people of Gaea love their kingdom's history, culture, land, and their families who live there, as much as I had once adored the Demon Lord.

How could they be happy after having their love and joy stolen, and then being forced to live as servants in the invading kingdom?

Things can't stay this way...! I don't want this to go on, regardless of how it plays into Saint Aela killing me.

Determined to change things, I raise my head and speak to the maid. "Hey, you. What's your name?"

The maid blinks at me. "Canna," she replies in a quiet voice.

I just asked a servant's name for the first time. Ever. It never crossed my mind that they have names.

Canna is a girl around the same age as me. Really looking at her for once made me notice that fact after all this time.

“...I see. Do you have family, Canna?”

“I have...no family. Both my father and mother died of the plague, and the villagers...um...feared that I might...well...have it, too. You brought me here just before they were about to...isolate me, Lady Elle.”

Canna’s story eases some of my guilt. I’m relieved I wasn’t the one who ripped her from her family. But I’m a moron for being consoled by this.

I mean, I have kidnapped so many people from Gaea. Not everyone is going to be from miserable circumstances. I just know some of them must despise me for tearing them from their families. This is depressing.

Until I gained these memories, I never knew how painful it is to be separated from family. I have none to speak of, so I didn’t understand the concept.

Children stay with their parents until age three in Analia but are then raised in a communal facility from age four until they turn thirteen. There we train in magic, are taught about the Demon Lord’s laws and edicts, and grow up adoring him like he’s our parent.

Each day is spent having it drilled into our heads that we love the Demon Lord and are loved by him even though none of us have ever met him.

“Canna, do you want to return to Gaea?” I ask with my gaze cast down, too afraid to look her in the eye. I watch her feet as she takes a huge step back.

She drops to her knees and brings her head within inches of the marble floor.

“Please forgive me, Lady Elle! Did I do something unpardonable in your eyes?! I no longer have anywhere left to go! Please, I beg of you, allow me to stay here! Please! Oh, please!”

I gasp in shock at her tearful appeal.

What? You want to stay here?

“Uh, Canna? Come on. Quit prostrating yourself before me! You can stay if you want to. You know how I, like, took you without asking? So...uh...I thought you might actually hate it here...! Anyway, quit pressing your head against the

cold floor and stand up!”

At my command, Canna rises, sobbing and sniffing.

Okay, so how am I supposed to process this? Canna is bawling her eyes out. She feels that strongly about not returning to Gaea...? She did just mention that both her parents passed away. Maybe that’s why? She can stay if she’s got nowhere to go. I’d actually prefer it that way.

Life will be rough if I lose all my servants in a day.

“You can stay if you want... But the others probably don’t feel the same way. Sorry, but can you speak with the servants and see who wants to go back to Gaea? Tell them I’ll take responsibility and send them home.”

“Wh-Why are you offering to do this...?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I snatched you guys away on a whim and now I...feel bad about it,” I stammer, restlessly twirling my hair around my finger. “I doubt what I’ve done can be forgiven just by sending you home with a sorry, but...I wanna make up for it even if it’s too little too late...”

Canna’s wet eyes round into saucers. She’s in complete shock. Not that I blame her. It’s a surprising turn of events. I’ve always brought people home and turned them into my servants like it was the most obvious thing to do.

“I-Is that so? I will go speak with the others since that is what you want, Lady Elle... But...erm...I don’t believe there will be any who will try to return to Gaea...”

“O-Of course there will be! It’s fine. Don’t mind my feelings! Enough chitchat. Go tell them this instant!” I demand in my usual spoiled, *loli* Grand Magi manner.

Canna rushes from the room.

I wonder if the people I kidnapped will forgive me... Nah. That’s asking for the impossible. Time to stop thinking about being forgiven.

Everything I did was out of the goodness of my heart, but...kidnapping people was a crime in my past life. Even if I can’t find forgiveness, I can at least apologize.

Wait. Now that I think about it, aren't I the first to be defeated in *Saint Aela of Gaea* because Aela stumbles across Elle in the middle of abducting villagers and fights to save them?

What the heck have I been doing? Being killed is a just punishment...



CANNA returns a short while later with the manor's servants in tow.

At a quick glance, there's about ten. That seems to be about everyone I've kidnapped. Yep, I've sure got a problem, making off with ten people by age fifteen.

And see, everyone looks paler than a ghost. Their expressions are grim and tormented... They must be angry. Yeah, I get how they feel. But, uh, what now? Could this be a Bad Ending where they take their revenge on me here and now?

The Grand Magi killed by the people she abducted before the saint ever gets to her. Now that's a real disgrace to the Grand Magi name!

I'm shaking in my boots when Canna comes forward.

"Lady Elle, I called upon every servant you brought from Gaea."

"Y-You've done well to come here today," I say through quivering lips. "There are some things I must tell you first—"

"Lady Elle! Please do not say you are going to send us back to Gaea! We will do anything to stay!"

"Say what...?"

I had been trying to apologize, holding on to the measly hope that they might forgive me, but the words of a middle-aged servant stop me short.

How do I interpret that? They don't wanna go home?

His plea is followed by the other servants' desperate begging to not be sent away. They launch into long-winded stories about their lives even though I didn't ask.

After hearing them out, I realize every single person I whisked away from Gaea had lost their families, jobs, and everything dear to them like Canna had,

and were taken away from dire circumstances by me.

Yes, I had kidnapped people with the best of intentions.

I know what I did was really arbitrary and disruptive, but I abducted them believing they would be happier living here. That's why I always chose unfortunate people who looked unhappy at a glance.

But my selection process was based on little more than gut instinct, which meant I abducted on impulse, not because I knew about their woes. I simply snatched up whoever I came across that looked down in the dumps... My instincts, however, seemed to have been spot on.

"Um, lemme get this straight. You'll all stay with me...? You aren't mad at me?" I double-check after hearing each servant's story. They break out into watery smiles and nod repeatedly. "Thank goodness!"

I accidentally let my true feelings slip out with a smile, causing the servants to react with "Lady Elle's so cute!" "Too cute!" and "I'll happily die for Lady Elle."

Thank goodness I'm cute! Is this that "law of cuteness" I often heard about in my past life coming into effect for me? I'm so lucky...! It's not too late for me yet. I can still avoid my fate as the first Grand Magi slain by Saint Aela!

I've received forgiveness from the people I kidnapped, so yeah, I'll stop snatching people left and right. Luckily, I somehow managed to pick only miserable people, but there's no guarantee it would stay that way.

As it stands, it's Elle's kidnapping spree escalating to abducting entire villages that brings Saint Aela's wrath down on her.

...I don't wanna die. Worst of all, my death won't be mourned, but mocked as a disgrace!

Agh, but Analia is currently at war with Gaea, so as long as I'm a member of the Grand Magi, I'll be stuck fighting Gaea's saint at some point...?

Hmm. Meh. I'll think about it more later. Today exhausted me, and I'm hungry.

Relieved to have evaded the first big obstacle leading to my eventual death, I seek out some warm baked sweets from the kitchens.



SEVERAL days have passed since my past life's memories invaded my mind. My relationship with Canna and the other servants is excellent now, and Canna is currently combing out my hair for the morning. It feels so nice.

Those foreign memories confused me at times, but I've gotten used to them now. Though I call them memories from my past life, they're full of nothing but the scenes from my favorite manga. I think I went to high school, but all that daily stuff is a vague blur. Probably has something to do with me thinking about the story right before I died.

While my memories related to everything but the manga are sparse, there's enough there to make me vaguely aware of how strange this kingdom is.

I mean, it's got a few—okay, fine, it has a lot—of oddities to it...I think?

"Lady Elle, you will be dining with Lord Julius Eldorad Griffith today," Canna cheerfully informs me in the middle of my brooding.

"Oh, that's today? Dinner with Julius..."

"It certainly is, milady."

Julius is a member of the Four Grand Magi like me. But we haven't said a single thing to each other before. Granted, that might be more because I only recently joined the Grand Magi, and Julius is the most powerful of the Four and someone not just anyone can see.

But I know a lot about him. More like everyone in Analia knows of him.

I mean, he's the strongest sorcerer among the Grand Magi and is reputed to have godly good looks and a dreamy face. Before I regained my memories, I had a tiny crush on him.

But I feel nothing positive toward him now. How could I, when he's going to call me the disgrace of the Grand Magi when I die?! Me, his fiancée if only in name!

Granted, Analia has absolutely no concept of love, and marriage partners are chosen by the Demon Lord based on the couple's magic and strength affinity.

So manga Julius likely didn't love Elle at all. I get it. It's only the natural course

of things for this world. Still, I won't stand for it.

Besides, I don't want Julius of all people to call me the disgrace of the Grand Magi! He's the one who gets saved by the heroine of the manga in the last half and ends up falling in love at first sight with her. He didn't know his savior was Saint Aela, but even after he discovers the truth, he continues to love her until he eventually changes sides to join Gaea.

Yep, he's basically a traitor.

Wouldn't that make him more of a disgrace than me?!

Elle dies fulfilling her duties in battle, but you betray the Grand Magi! Who's the real disgrace here, huh?! It's you! Isn't that right?!

"L-Lady Elle, is something troubling you?" Canna asks, worry in her voice.

The fury coiling in my belly had me huffing and harrumphing

"It's nothing. I was just getting worked up thinking about a buncha stuff," I say and have Canna bring out a dinner-party dress.



DINNER with Julius is happening now.

Julius and I sit at a claw-footed round table with seats for four. I steal a peek at him as I eat a spread of Analia's specialty: nasty food that reeks worse than the strongest medicine.

To my dismay, he's spitefully beautiful. Perfect blond hair without a single strand out of place falls in just the right places around his piercing blue eyes. His flawless white skin reminds me of a porcelain doll, and though he looks slender at first, finely chiseled muscles push against his starched shirt.

He's a genius who had total possession of the title of Analia's strongest sorcerer at twenty-two. Classiness exudes from him as he elegantly dines with a fork and knife.

I'll acknowledge it frankly: he's as cool as they say. I raise my glass in genuine approval of the fine specimen of handsomeness in front of me.

I was very fond of his character in the manga, too. Julius, the cruel villain who

falls in love for the first time with the enemy kingdom's saint. I even cheered on his heartrending feelings.

But that was the me of the past.



“What’s wrong? Wish to say something?” Julius asks, looking at me like I’m a nuisance for furtively checking him out.

“N-Not really! J-Just thought that you eat p-pretty!” I stammer.

He marvels at me before returning to his meal.

Bad me! Bad me! I was staring too much. I hastily turn my attention back to my food, pretending I’ve done nothing wrong.

Before dinner started, Julius and I discussed what our future together will be like. As a couple selected by the Demon Lord, we should start trying to have children as soon as possible.

The Demon Lord chose us to create the greatest offspring possible. But both Julius and I are members of the Analian army’s Four Grand Magi. Analia is currently at war with the neighboring kingdom of Gaea, so we don’t have time to be making babies. Hence why we wrapped up that conversation with the decision to wait until things are settled on the battlefield.

You could save me from falling off a cliff into the ocean with a hundred circling sharks and I wouldn’t be more relieved than I felt then.

Sure, Julius is breathtaking. I’d always looked up to him, and his scenes had me rolling around in bed when I read the manga.

But this guy’s a traitor and he’s gonna call me a disgrace after I die! I’ll never forgive him. I don’t wanna marry him! I’m kicking this engagement to the curb!

...But annulling our engagement is the same as betraying the Demon Lord. He’s the one who picked Julius as my fiancé. Running from our engagement means disobeying his decision. It means going against direct orders from the Demon Lord I love and adore.

I still...love the Demon Lord...even now. How could I not when I was raised to? In the facility, I prayed to the Demon Lord every day, thanked him, and lived believing he loved me.

I know from my memories of another life that the Demon Lord basically brainwashed me—no, he’s brainwashed the citizens of Analia.

The Demon Lord probably doesn’t love me for real. We’ve never even met.

If he actually loved me, he would show himself and pat me on the head, right? “You’ve done well. I have high expectations of you as a Grand Magi.” Why’s it so hard for him to say that or anything to me?

Honestly, it’s questionable if the Demon Lord is real. Only the DemiOracle can speak with him. As the voice of the Demon Lord, the DemiOracle informs the people of his decisions. I’ve lived until today believing those were the words of the Demon Lord.

All the blood and sweat I put into becoming one of the Four Grand Magi was solely to make the Demon Lord love me more and more and more...

“You’re different from what I heard. Word in the castle is that you’re a loud and annoying woman... Are you feeling unwell?” Julius stops eating and asks after me.

Calling me a loud and annoying woman is kindarude, but I think he’s showing concern in his own way? Julius has a bright future ahead as the traitorous disgrace of the Four Grand Magi, but he might not be such a bad person.

“Have you ever met with the Demon Lord, Julius?” I ask out of the blue.

Julius quietly places his fork and knife on the table. “...I have never met him. Only the DemiOracle is allowed to. Why do you ask such a thing?” Suspicion glints in his turquoise eyes, the same color as the gem hanging from his left ear.

He has every right to be suspicious. It’s strange for anyone in Analia to ask if someone else has met the Demon Lord. We aren’t supposed to ever have such overambitious and preposterous notions. Our education at the facility drills that into our heads. We are raised to live within the system of order the Demon Lord created without questioning anything.

“Just a passing...curiosity,” I settle for and return to my meal.

I can feel Julius studying me with piercing scrutiny.

It doesn’t matter what he thinks. I’ve decided to go see the Demon Lord for myself. I have to, because being this indecisive and gloomy isn’t like me.

Chapter 2: Magic Sanctum Invasion Strategy

I never did find out what the Demon Lord's identity was in the manga. It might've been covered in the final volume... Grr! It frustrates me by the day! How could I have died with such horrible timing? Couldn't the truck have waited until I read my manga?!

I'm cursing my past self for being such a klutz and the unknown truck driver for not watching where he was going while I draw a magic circle with a radius of about thirty feet in my manor's dungeon.

"Nomoniet nomoniet ein ik... Transference Gate. Answer my request with this blood offering. My wisdom is absolute law."

Silver light surges from the completed magic circle and fades. I step out of the circle and slice the back of my hand, letting the red drops drip into a small vial. Once it fills, I stop the bleeding and put a cork in the vial.

All done.

"Canna, I have something important to discuss with you," I say to the maid fearfully watching my magic ritual from the sidelines.

I hold the vial of my blood out to her.

"I am about to break the Demon Lord's law. I likely won't return alive. Even if I do come back in one piece, I'll be marked a traitor. Should I not return, and Analia's army comes to attack the manor, I want you to bring everyone into this teleportation circle and escape outside. The spell will activate when you spill my blood in the center of the magic circle. I made it so anyone inside will be teleported to Gaea's frontier land. You're welcome to take all the gems, money, and valuables inside the manor with you. Use what you can to survive on your own in Gaea."

I press the vial of blood into Canna's hands. She looks up at me with astonished eyes.

“L-Lady Elle! What are you planning to do?! Why wouldn’t you return alive...?! I don’t want that! I don’t want us to be separated for good!”

“My decision...has been made. I do feel bad...for selfishly dragging you all to my manor and not being able to look after you until the end. Ultimately, maybe I am just stupid Elle, the trivial shrimp, the first of the Four Grand Magi to be defeated, and a disgrace... Sorry, Canna,” I apologize and climb the stairs out of the dungeon.

I hear Canna pleading with me to stop, but I can’t, not now. I could have scraped out a meager living in the shadows while keeping a wary eye out for Saint Aela. That was a choice.

I wanted to experience what it feels like to fall in love, too. I wish I could’ve eaten my fill of all sorts of delicious foods.

I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to live in my favorite manga, so I wish I could’ve seen Saint Aela just once. What fun it would be to see the main characters come together and watch the epic scenes unfold in real time.

But I have to make sure of it with my own eyes. Even if this choice leads to me being hunted down as a traitor who defied the Demon Lord and my eventual death—I want to confirm the Demon Lord’s existence for myself. I want to learn about what it is I have loved and believed in.

The power of magic is the crystallization of wisdom and technology. Sorcerers are the seekers of knowledge. Once something piques our curiosity and fans the flames of an inquiring mind, we can’t stop until we learn everything about it.

After all, the Demon Lord raised us to be this way.



I’VE arrived in front of the castle where the Demon Lord resides. Guards are stationed in front of the gates. Likely soldiers under Steel Regulus of the Four Grand Magi.

The Four Grand Magi are in charge of Analia’s military, and each serves a specific role. Julius, the strongest of the Grand Magi, is the commanding officer of the Analian army, the Demon Lord’s armed forces. The soldiers invading Gaea move under Julius’s orders.

Sereniel the Temptress, second strongest Grand Magi, is the executive officer of the Analian army serving directly under Julius. She has the most authority in the military after Julius.

Regulus, the third strongest Grand Magi, is generally responsible for maintaining peace and order in the kingdom. Put in terms from my past life, he's kind of like a police chief and does not participate in war.

And I, the fourth strongest, am the director of the Centers for Magic Research. I just recently took the position, though.

I wonder who my successor will be. Never mind. I should stop thinking about what will happen after I go through with this. I need to focus on what I'm doing in the here and now.

Mind made up, I activate Analyze in my right eye. Geometric patterns forming complex magic circles spread and converge before my eye, changing the world seen through it to a different color.

The spell has begun analyzing the magic used to defend the castle: Teleportation Resile, Shield Wall, Magic Detect, Intruder Alert... Figures there'd be a ton of defense spells cast on it.

But as luck would have it, Steel Regulus isn't in the castle today, making this my one and only shot if I'm gonna go through with it. Entering the castle is no problem for me as a Grand Magi, but the inner sanctum where the Demon Lord lives is located deeper than the deepest depths of hell. Not even someone of my authority is allowed into those inner parts of the castle.

Just poking your big toe into this area thoroughly protected by layers of magic will get you detected and apprehended in seconds. I have to temporarily disable the castle's defenses.

I don't want to get caught before I see the Demon Lord. I'm definitely going to meet with him. I'm prepared to die, but only after I confirm who—or what—the Demon Lord is. I'm absolutely going to learn the true identity of what I've loved all these years.

I touch a blue magic stone about the size of a human head hidden in the tall grass. Six more are set up in a wide circle around the Demon Lord's castle. Each

stone is engraved with the magic circles for Resonance and Delay Magic. It's what I prepared in advance to sneak into the inner sanctum today.

"Nomoneik nomoneik ein ik... Delay Gate. Answer my request with this blood offering. My wisdom is absolute law." I chant the spell and drip my blood onto the magic stone, which reacts with a pale glow.

It's a bit plain, but a large-scale spell should have triggered. I take another look at the castle with Analyze active in my right eye. Delay Magic has covered the castle's defense spells like a shadow that can't be seen unless you train your eyes on one point. Now the defenses won't trigger immediately after I enter the inner sanctum.

I suck at casting intricate spells, so I was on pins and needles worrying if it'd work, but it's a huge success. Go me! I'm Elle of the Four Grand Magi for a reason!

"After all, I love the Demon Lord the most! And the Demon Lord loves me—Ack! My catchphrase came out again...!"

Succeeding at the kind of magic I tend to royally screw up got me exalting the Demon Lord like I used to... And here I am about to break his law! I've got issues... But can you really blame me? I mean, I always said that line whenever I succeeded at difficult or awesome spells. Grr! Leave it to the Demon Lord to land a mental attack on me before I even set foot inside his castle!

Stop, stop. Calm down, me!

A young lady in the height of her youth shouldn't be loudly worshiping some Demon Lord all alone in the middle of a forest in the dead of night in the first place.

I take several calming breaths before flying to the castle gates. I might be small, but I'm still a Grand Magi; I can walk right through the front gates without anyone questioning me.

I pass through the gates with an unassuming face and head straight to the castle. Everyone I see steps aside to give way to Lady Elle of the Grand Magi, making my advance inside quick and easy.

People become sparser and the air feels heavier, and then I spot a plain-

looking door. My destination. Two armed guards are standing in the way.

Only the DemiOracle can go beyond that door. Long story short, that's the entrance to the magic sanctum.

The guards warily eye me as I strut up to them, but they quickly bow when they recognize I'm a Grand Magi.

"Lady Elle! What troubles bring you to this place?!" one of the guards asks, afraid I come bearing bad news.

I pull a vial from my dress pocket and pop the cork.

"I simply came to reward you both for fulfilling your daily duties."

"To reward...us?"

I hold out the vial to the guard with a dazed expression.

"A magic potion to cure your fatigue."

"A magic potion? But...opening the lid to a magic potion here...will trigger...the magic alert system..."

The two guards inhale the sleep spell cast on the liquid in the vial and pass out.

"Sorry, boys. Things have gone surprisingly quick and smooth so far. Is Analia gonna be okay with such flimsy defenses? Almost feel like I need to have a talk with Steel Regulus," I mutter, staring down at the peacefully sleeping guards.

Well, I guess the defenses cast on the outside would stop most people when it comes down to it. Those are some mighty powerful spells. Delaying their effects was possible because I'm me, but that's not something just any Joe Schmoe can do.

After all, I love the Demon Lord the most! And— AHM! I really gotta stop saying that.

I quell my speeding heart and place a hand on the doorknob. The door creaks open.

The Demon Lord...is up ahead.

But apparently not right here, because a set of dark spiraling stairs leading

underground is all that's on the other side of the door. It'd be too easy if the Demon Lord was sitting right there when you open the door.

I'm careful to take one steep step at a time. After descending several hundred steps, the stairs disappear into a long passageway. It's too dark to see well, but I can make out a door at the end. Surely, beyond that door, is the Demon Lord—

“What are you doing here?”

My heart jumps in my throat; my shoulders jerk skyward.

Someone found out I was trying to sneak into the magic sanctum?! I didn't sense anyone, but someone is definitely standing behind me now...

I can't undo having been seen. I have to take them out. Though I don't look the part, I am one of the Four Grand Magi. I've got nothing against them, but I need to immobilize the person for a bit.

I turn around and come face-to-face with utter despair. Who wouldn't? Because before me is—

“J-Julius...?!”

Julius. The strongest sorcerer in Analia. The strongest Grand Magi.

Why is Julius here?! What do I do? What can I do?!

I was planning on immobilizing anyone who saw me, like the villainess that I am, but I'm not so dumb as to think I could do a thing to Julius. What's he doing here? Did I screw up and get discovered infiltrating the castle?! By Julius of all people?!

Calm down, me. There should still be a way out of this. Should I come up with a feasible excuse to get through the moment? Like, I could say I was patrolling the area because I sensed an intruder... Would that get me through?

No, it's not good enough. If he looks into it, he'll be able to trace Delay Magic to me.

Most of all, even in the unlikely event that I get past Julius with a random reason...I won't get a second chance. After pulling this stunt today, there will never come another day I can see the Demon Lord.

Sweat coats my hands.

“I asked what you are doing here,” Julius repeats because I’m staring at him in silence. His voice is deeper than when he spoke to me at that dinner. His commanding, icy visage is veiled, making it impossible to tell what he’s thinking.

“Um...there’s an...intruder further in...,” I answer as sweat drenches the back of my neck.

Suspicion draws Julius’s brows together. “An intruder? You’re the only one I sense down here.”

Yeah, I knew this excuse wouldn’t work on him. Well, crap. What now? What option do I have? I’ve come this far; do I just go all-in and fight my way out?

Not even Julius will escape my most powerful Fire Bomb unscathed.

Okay! I’m gonna teach Julius, the future disgrace of the Grand Magi who falls in love with the enemy nation’s saint, a lesson with my heavy-damage-dealing magic...!

Yeah, no, I can’t. Casting a wide-area attack in this narrow passageway will destroy the entire castle, killing me in the process.

That said, my loss is as good as sealed if I fight Julius without using my über-special skills! I’m terrible with intricate, small-scale magic, and this guy is the strongest sorcerer for a reason.

Frankly, the magic pouring off Julius in waves makes it plain as day that he’s not someone I can win against when I’m already at a field disadvantage. I can’t stop sweating.

But I can’t give up now. I’ve come too far.

“...Please, let me pass. I want to see the Demon Lord no matter what,” I implore.

Julius’s eyebrow twitches.

I can’t beat him. And since I don’t stand a chance against him, persuasion is my only weapon. Everyone I brought to my manor from Gaea has told me cuteness always wins the day, and Julius is my fiancé in name, so he might just overlook what I’m doing...

With that in mind, I play the cute card by looking up at him from under my fluttering lashes. Julius's stony expression remains just as nebulous.

Er, yeah, I shouldn't have expected that to work... This is the guy who's going to call me the disgrace of the Four Grand Magi upon my deathbed!

I knew it. It's do or die. Sink or swim. That's how bad I want to meet the Demon Lord and make sure he's real.

I slowly fall back as I hide my hands behind my back and cast a spell with my fingers.

Just a little time is all I need. If I can just stop Julius for a few seconds, I can charge down the passageway into the inner sanctum. And then I'll see the Demon Lord!

"What do you intend to do upon meeting the Demon Lord?" Julius asks, icily watching my retreat.

Behind my back, I complete the spell I was crafting with my hands. I vigorously thrust both hands toward him.

"I just want to see him with my own eyes!" I shout, activating Light Flare. Intense, blinding light explodes in front of Julius's eyes.

Wordless spells only last for a few seconds, but I should've succeeded in temporarily blinding him.

I'll run to the Demon Lord during this opening! I spin around to race down the passage leading to the inner sanctum. The second I take a big step forward with my right foot—Julius is standing directly in front of me.

Why is he right here?! Wasn't he on the other side of the passageway behind me...?! Didn't he take a direct hit from the Light Flare?!

"That was my afterimage."

H-His afterimage...?! This guy just used an over-the-top spell often seen from the end boss in a video game!

I go to run, but my legs buckle and I collapse back on my butt.

Julius looks down at me, cold and calm.

Why?! Why did it turn out this way...?! How did Julius even realize I'd infiltrated this part of the castle?!

Tch! Just let me take one look at the Demon Lord if nothing else!

But fear has paralyzed my legs. Julius walks over to me, unconcerned with my inner turmoil.

I'm doomed.

Well, I pretty much forfeited my life the moment I decided to sneak into the sanctum to see the Demon Lord.

Punishment is all that ever awaited me for breaking the law. But even at that price, I still wanted to see him. I wanted to confirm the identity of what I have blindly loved all these years. I came here prepared to die later just for that confirmation, but now I won't even get to do that much?

Julius stops in front of me as I tremble. He opens his mouth. "...Follow me. I'll show you to what we call the Demon Lord."

"Wha—?"

His unexpected invitation stops my brain. "Follow me"? "I'll show you"?

As I'm trying to parse what he said, Julius is already halfway down the passageway.

He's not going to arrest me? Kill me? He said to follow him. That he'll show me to the Demon Lord.

Is this a trick...? No, he has no reason to go out of his way to fool me.

"Hurry up... Don't you want to see?" Julius turns around, already a distance down the corridor, and asks me because I'm too confused to move. His question surprises me, but I've grasped the situation enough to shove to my feet.

"I-I'm coming! I want to see! I want the honor of meeting him!"

Is it just me or did Julius give a satisfied nod before he set off again?

I run to catch up to his brisk pace and fall in step beside him.

"Julius, why are you going to, well, let me see? Have you met the Demon Lord

before?" I ask in a tremulous voice. Julius glances at me, then immediately looks forward.

"No time. Talk later."

I bite my tongue because his tone leaves no room for argument.

W-What's the big deal about a little small talk? My mind is still reeling from shock...

Depressed from receiving the cold shoulder, I keep my mouth shut as I follow Julius to the large door at the end of the passage.

I know on the spot that the Demon Lord is on the other side. I can sense that much overwhelming magic through the door.

I swallow the lump in my throat while Julius lifts the magic lock with practiced ease. He's skilled. Very skilled.

Does he come here a lot...? He releases the powerful magic on the door in one effortless swipe, and it opens with a heavy groan.

The scene beyond steals my full attention.

I rush into the room and sweep my eyes over the walls, floor, and ceiling. I'm deeply moved by the marvel of magic applied to every end of the room without a single nook or cranny left untouched.

Breathtaking. Magic circles like nothing I've ever seen before are carved intricately into every surface of the room.

Magic circles and squares of various sizes emit a pale luminance. The number of engraved and interlinked magic circles could be in the hundreds, or even thousands. They're too close and connected to count. The exquisite balance the circles form can only be defined as artistic.

Not even I, a sorcerer who has reached the rank of Grand Magi, can begin to grasp the meaning of these magic circles.

"Amazing...", I sigh in awe.

I run my finger along the trail of light from the magic circle that stretches around the walls. Is this magic formula a part of a calculation to predict the

future? Incredible. It has a tremendous amount of computing power that ordinary humans could never attain.

I wouldn't expect anything less of the room where the Demon Lord resides. Is this a magic circle he compiled? Amazing. I knew it! The Demon Lord is a wondrous and awe-inspiring being! There's actually a Demon Lord who drew this masterpiece that words can't even begin to describe!

The Demon Lord we've loved and adored exists for real!

But if this is supposed to be the Demon Lord's room, why isn't he here...?

I swing my gaze around the room with a start. Only Julius and I are present.

"Julius, where is the Demon Lord?"

"...Right here," Julius mutters in an uncharacteristically weak voice.

"Where?"

The Demon Lord is here? I don't understand, so I take another look around the room and still don't see anyone.

"He's not here," I point out.

Julius stares at the largest, most complex magic circle and slowly explains, "The very magic circles engraved in this room are the identity of the thing we worshiped as our demon lord."

What? Did I hear that right? What is he saying?

Utterly lost, I look to Julius for answers. He averts his eyes.

"There is no such thing as a demon lord. There is only a magic circle that seeks the optimal solution to promote the development of magic."

"A magic circle that...seeks the optimal solution?" A hollow voice slips past my quivering lips. I can't think.

"This country has been controlled by a magic circle all along. The magic circle presented us with the optimal solutions to guide this country in the direction it wanted, and we put those solutions into practice. The DemiOracle is nothing more than the blood offering to activate it. Everyone living in this country is a pawn to further develop magic."

Huh...? Wh-What is he blabbing on about? That can't be true!

"I don't believe you! I mean, magic circles are something we sorcerers create, empower, and use! One of our own creations is controlling us...? Absurd! Don't feed me a ridiculous lie! Come on, let me see the Demon Lord now! Show me to the Demon Lord I've always loved!"

Julius gives me a pained look when I blurt out my confused and disorganized feelings.

What's with that face? Don't look at me like that. If you keep looking so hurt, it'll make it seem like every ridiculous thing you said is the truth!

"Elle, the Demon Lord you loved—no, that which we considered a Demon Lord and were all devoted to—doesn't exist."

The Demon Lord doesn't exist?

Everything is going dark before my eyes. Maybe it'd be easier if I let go of consciousness and fainted.

The possibility had always been in the back of my mind like a splinter too deep under the skin to pull out. I considered the prospect that the Demon Lord doesn't really exist, and that we had been offering our love to something that never existed in the first place.

But I yearned for the Demon Lord, and what he stood for, from the bottom of my heart. A piece of me always believed that he was watching over my hard work and accomplishments and would someday stand at my side in a tangible form...

But it's not a he or a she...but a magic circle?

"The war with Gaea is being fought for nothing more than this magic circle's calculations that this war will develop a powerful magical civilization." Julius points to the brightest magic circle in the center of the ceiling. Its light pulsates, coloring the room in various shades of blue.

This one is simplistic, unlike the other circles incorporating complicated techniques and brush strokes. Actually, it might not even count as a magic circle anymore. It's more like graffiti.

I closely decipher the graffiti strokes. It depicts a world where people can live conveniently through the use of magic. But that convenience is given by magic, and the people who live in that world are dominated by magic. Living by the laws of magic, these people give blood offerings, have no emotions, and have simply turned into instruments for pushing along the development of magic technology.

“What have I been mastering magic for all this time if not the Demon Lord? To become a puppet controlled by a freaking magic circle...?” I mutter, stunned.

Slowly, I raise my head and meet Julius’s eyes. He looks as perplexed as I feel. For a while, our gazes stay locked as we both seek the answer from the other, until Julius breaks the hold.

“...Elle, we’re out of time. Let’s go back,” he instructs and grabs my arm. He tries to lead me from the room. I swing my arm, knocking his hand loose.

“How can I?! This! This is too much! Julius, did you know all along? Did you know and keep it quiet? This...this is...” I wail and crumble to my knees.

Some sort of liquid fills my eyes, distorting my vision. I squeeze them shut and something wet spills down my cheeks—tears. And then I realize that I’ve never cried since the day I became self-aware.

“My Null Magic will fade soon. Weep later. We’re leaving.”

My consciousness grows dull at the sound of Julius’s voice just above my head. My eyelids are drooping. I’m sleepy.

Did Julius cast a spell on me?

I look up to catch the expression on his face, but the tears make it impossible to see anything.

Chapter 3: A New Start

I wake up in bed. The ceiling I see every day comes into focus. The Demon Lord's mark is embossed there. It's a skull with horns.

Wanting the Demon Lord's seal to be the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see at the end of the day, I redecorated the ceiling myself. From good morning to good night, I devoted every day to the Demon Lord.

"Lady Elle!"

I turn toward the tearful cry beside the bed. Canna is staring down at me with swollen red eyes.

"Canna? What made you cry?"

"Are you really asking me that?! Do you know just how worried I was about you, Lady Elle?!"

"About me...? Oh, right, I..." I trail off as I remember what went down before I blacked out.

I wish it had all just been a dream, from the glowing magic circles to the truth about the Demon Lord. How am I supposed to take this news?

Do I even get an option after defying the Demon Lord's law?

I had cast Delay Magic to break through the castle's defenses. Everyone should already know that I infiltrated the magic sanctum.

So, that begs the question: Why have I been able to sleep away the day in my own bed? I expected to be discovered and in the middle of an interrogation for committing high treason by now...

"Canna!" I cry. "The Analian army hasn't called for my arrest yet? Regulus's henchmen haven't come banging on the door for me?"

Canna shakes her head. "Pardon? Why in the magic aftermath would that ever happen? You are one of the Four Grand Magi, Lady Elle."

Nothing's happened?

Wait, didn't Julius say something about casting Null? And how in the world did I get back to my manor?

"Canna, how did I get back home?"

"Lord Julius carried you here in his arms, Lady Elle. Like"—she cradles one of my pillows in her arms to show me—"the way a man carries his bride over the threshold. It took my breath away how very much the two of you looked like a fairy-tale couple." She finishes with a dreamy look.

Julius carried me all the way back home? Maybe he cast Null to conceal my messy attempt at Delay. I've only mastered offense magic and suck epically at complex spells that require attention to the finer details. I don't doubt Julius possesses the skills to smoothly infiltrate the castle without leaving a trace.

What stands out to me the most was the way Julius behaved. He seemed accustomed to visiting the Demon Lord's—no, the room engraved with magic circles. That definitely wasn't his first hurrah. He also knew about the magic circles and that the Demon Lord isn't real...

"I'm gonna go see Julius. I need to confirm something with him."

"Lord Julius is currently staying in one of the guest rooms."

"He is?"

"He said he was tired after carrying you here and stayed in the manor overnight. I was informed he woke up a short while ago. I believe he should be having breakfast about now."

Uh, where's he get off having breakfast at my house without being invited?

"What would you like to do about breakfast, Lady Elle? If you don't have an appetite, I can—"

"I'm fine. I can eat. I want to speak with Julius anyway. Make it happen, Canna."

Canna helps me get dressed before I head to the guest room where he's staying.

The double-leaf doors open on Julius gracefully sipping tea. He already finished breakfast, if the clean plates are anything to go by.

When I enter the room, Julius turns his singularly handsome face toward me and briefly comments, “You’re up?”

Don’t “You’re up (indifferently cool face)” me!

My head is exploding with information overload from what we went through together and a boatload of questions, and here you are drinking my black tea with your pinky finger held out like royalty!

So much crap I don’t understand has gone down in the last few hours that I’m getting annoyed with Julius.

Oh my Demon Lord! Worst of all, the fragrance of the tea leaves filling the room belongs to my favorite wild strawberry black tea. Of all things, they didn’t have to serve Julius the tea I’m most fond of!

I shoot a grudging look at the maid who served him and find her making googly eyes at Julius.

One good look around the room and every single maid here has flushed cheeks and dreamy expressions.

What the heck?! Weren’t they the ones who just recently said stuff like “Lady Elle is the best!” “The cutest!” “We love you!” I glower at Julius for capturing their hearts with just his face.

How dare he look so cool and aloof!

Ugh, I still need to ask him about what happened.

“Julius! What was the meaning of what you showed me?! That room—”

“Lower your voice,” Julius warns with a frown.

Coward that I am, the intensity of his command shuts me right up, giving Julius an opening to arbitrarily ask the maids to leave us. This is my manor. I’m the master of the house. Yet he’s giving the orders!

I shoot him an annoyed look for naturally taking control of the situation, and our eyes meet. He sighs and his whole face softens. Plainly put, he’s giving me a

top-grade, swoon-worthy smile capable of melting men and women alike. Seeing this stone-cold face that almost never changes break into a sudden serene smile is enough to make my heart skip a beat—but it didn't! I swear! I won't succumb to his beautiful smile!

Nearly becoming a captive to his charms, I cross my arms to show that I won't be daunted.

"Julius! We're clear to talk now, yeah? What happened yesterday?! You know...what's the deal with that...room? The Demon Lord..." I become less coherent by the second and drop my gaze to the velvet rug.

It's too painful still. I'm struggling to accept the truth. I mean, the Demon Lord is nothing more than inanimate magic circles...

"There was no Demon Lord from the beginning. Or there may have been one at the start. At least, there was someone who created that magic circle when this country was founded. Perhaps that person is who we can call the Demon Lord. Of course, they're from the distant past. They're long gone now. What we believed in, loved, and dedicated our bodies and minds to never existed."

Hearing him say it loud and clear thrusts an unbelievably difficult truth on me. I look up and stare at Julius's face, searching for a lie I can't find.

I see. So there really wasn't a Demon Lord. When I gained memories from my previous life, I began to doubt the Demon Lord, and when I saw the magic circles yesterday, that doubt turned into conviction. I thought I could accept the truth. But having Julius's affirmation that the Demon Lord never existed has plummeted me into despair after all.

The Demon Lord was my rock. My hope.

My body refuses to move and my eyes refuse to blink, just as my mind rejects the truth. Julius runs the pad of his thumb down my cheek. I lack the drive to knock away his hand and let him do what he wants. His thumb brushes under my eye.

My face feels wet. It appears I'm crying again.

I cried yesterday and I'm crying again today... I've become a crybaby. Am I going to do this every time I think of the Demon Lord?

“Elle.”

Tears threaten to overflow like a waterfall from my eyes at the sound of Julius’s unusually tender voice. I find myself wrapped in his arms without realizing he’d moved. Pressing the tears and runny nose I can’t suppress against his hard chest, I stifle my voice and weep.

Julius stiffly pats me on the back, seemingly not quite sure what to do with himself as I continue to shed tears in his arms.

After staying that way for an eternity, I feel oddly refreshed and rub at my aching eyes with a lace handkerchief. Julius’s shirt is all sticky and gross from my tears and snot.

He has been sweet from the moment I started crying until I stopped, but he scowls slightly when he sees the icky, wet stains I’ve left behind on his clothes. I think I’m starting to get the hang of reading his expressions, which I’d thought him incapable of.

“Hey, Julius? Since when did you know?” I ask after I finish blowing and wiping my facial fluids.

“When I turned twenty,” he says, looking straight into my eyes. “Something happened that made me question the Demon Lord’s existence, instilling a desire in me to see for myself. Young and naïve, I used a loophole in the castle’s magic defenses to sneak in. Those defenses were created by me at Steel Regulus’s behest. I had designed a loophole in it without anyone knowing.”

Julius pauses and takes a tremulous breath. “...I still don’t know why I went so far to see the Demon Lord back then. And when I discovered the true identity behind the entity I worshiped...I resented my skill,” he bites out, his face twisting with the memory as he casts down his eyes.

So Julius also felt conflicted when he found out. Same as me. But our reactions make sense. We lived our entire lives believing in one thing. Every person residing in Analia spends their every waking minute loving the Demon Lord.

“Is your loophole the reason why the castle guards haven’t discovered what I did?”

“It is. But you took a drastic measure sneaking in with Delay Magic. Honestly, I’m not impressed.”

I agree. Delay Magic can get you through the moment, but it’s a shoddy spell that will eventually give the user away. Not the best for hiding your tracks.

“I had to...because I suck at complicated spells! Besides, I didn’t care about what happened after. I didn’t give a jot about what happened to me if it meant meeting the Demon Lord...”

“Take care of yourself more. Think about the future, too.”

Julius said something so caring and out of character for him, I stare at his face.

Why are you saying such nice things to me...?! You’re stinking Julius! I know that behind those kind words is the cruel man who will call me the disgrace of the Grand Magi upon my death!

...But thank you. You’ve made my day even if it’s a lie. Having someone care about my well-being is freeing.

Because I have spent every day working my hardest believing the Demon Lord has always been watching over me... Ahh. This sucks. Thinking about it again is getting me all emotional.

Sniffling, I hold my head high.

“I know! I’ll never pull such a stupid stunt again!” I declare loudly. “So, Julius, did you not feel anything when you first saw that magic circle? How can you serve as Grand Magi in the Analian army like it’s nothing? What drives you now?” I press in a flurry of questions.

“I know no other way of life,” he replies, a self-derisive smile lifting his lips. “I clung to my prior lifestyle out of sheer habit. Ultimately, I ran from the truth.”

Hearing him say that makes me realize that Julius also grieved the Demon Lord’s betrayal in his own way. Unable to face the hard truth, he sealed it away.

What will I do? I...

“Julius, I don’t want to live out the rest of my life as a captive puppet of the Demon Lord—of a magic circle. So I’m going to leave this country. Can you let me go? I’m going to abandon everything given to me by the Demon Lord, from

my duties to my rank, and depart this land.”

I may be the fourth and weakest of the Four Grand Magi, but I’m still a Grand Magi. Leaving that position open will bring hardship down on Analia.

This one action makes me the unmistakable disgrace of the Grand Magi. But I’m okay with that. I don’t care if it makes me a disgrace or anything else. I’m going to quit being Elle of the Demon Lord’s Four Grand Magi. I’ll become just Elle.

After quietly listening to my decision, Julius gives a slow and deliberate nod.

“...I see. It’s a sound plan. I won’t stop you. Leading you to that room is what brought about this decision, after all,” he says softly, a hint of visible regret lingering in his tone.

“Hey, Julius, tell me this one last thing. Why did you take me to the Demon Lord’s room?”

Surprise flickers across Julius’s face as if he never expected to be asked why.

“I’m not too sure why I did, either. Perhaps curiosity got the better of me. I get the sense I just wanted to know how someone other than me would react to learning that secret... But I am glad I brought you there. Watching you openly mourn the truth about the Demon Lord’s nonexistence helped me realize I’ve been in mourning all this time. I have your tears to thank. At long last, I know what it is I must do—that I wish to do,” he explains, giving me the ultimate sunny smile that melts some of the chill I get when I look at his face. It’s almost as if he’s been freed of some weight that’s been haunting him for a long time.



“**COME** on! Hurry into the magic circle! Make sure you have everything! All set?” I call out as I stuff servants from my manor into the center of the teleportation circle.

That’s right—today is the memorable day we depart Analia! I’m leaving this land just like I told Julius I would. And I’m going to live how I want from now on! Staying in Analia will make me think of the Demon Lord whether I want to or not. But there is no Demon Lord, so it’s impossible for me to serve as a member of the Analian army’s Grand Magi with my current mindset.

That's why I am going to live as a free woman! Surrounded by the things I love, without putting all my hopes and dreams in something else, I'm going to do what I want through my own strength. My destination is the outskirts of Gaea where I originally planned to send just my servants. It's a weather-beaten, small plot of land at the foot of a mountain, but I'll overcome any obstacle with my magic and gumption!

"We're all set, Lady Elle!"

With Canna's assurances that everything is set and ready to go, I slit open the back of my hand with a knife.

"Okay! Here we go! Be careful not to get teleportation sickness!" I warn and drip my blood onto the magic circle.

When a teleportation circle lights up, your vision is distorted and your brains feel like they're being shaken up inside your skull.

I hear small cries and yelps from Canna and the others, but there's nothing I can do to help them. I've heard you won't get too sick if someone who's skilled at teleportation spells sends you somewhere, but this spell is a huge undertaking that most people can't pull off unless they've hit Grand Magi class or higher. In other words, I'm awesome just for using this god-class spell!

As I'm internally justifying myself to the screaming servants, my feet make contact with the ground and the quaking stops.

I open my eyes to the bright sunlight and a ginormous snowcapped mountain.

This is the frontier lands on the outskirts of Gaea. It's quite a distance from where I lived in Analia, but close enough I can just barely check on things there with magic. Since this area is so far from central Gaea, I should be able to live here in secret without the local kingdom finding out as long as I don't do anything conspicuous.

We're gonna build a small village here...!

Heart set, I turn toward the plot of land and am dumbstruck.

"Huh...? Why are there so many shiny new buildings?"

Nothing was here when I last inspected the area. Now there are several dozen

magnificent stone houses. I don't sense any people.

"That's our Lady Elle for you! You built us homes before we arrived!" one of the servants exclaims upon seeing all the brand-new buildings nicely organized into a village. The thing is, I, Elle, have no recollection of ever doing such a thing.

I head with the servants to the town with houses but no people, and I notice there's a particularly large mansion at the back.

I activate the Presence Sense magic circle in my right eye.

Huh. I detect someone in that large mansion. More precisely, I detect a certain someone's presence...

"Stay here, everyone! I have to check something first!" I tell the servants and take large strides toward the biggest mansion.

What in the magic backlash is he thinking?! What is he after, doing something like this...?!

I sweep into the mansion to the beat of my chaotic heart and throw open the doors to the room containing the person I'm seeking out.

"Hey! Julius! What's the big idea?!" I storm in, yelling.

Julius lazily looks up from the book he was reading on a large, plush couch. "Finally here? You're considerably late."



His casualness ticks me off.

“Don’t you ‘You’re late’ me! I just asked what you’re playing at here! What is it?! Planning on arresting me for treason or the like after all?! Just so you know, if you do that, I’ll tell them that you rigged the castle defenses!”

“Arrest you? Why would I do such a thing?”

“Then what are you doing here?! I don’t want anything to do with Analia anymore! I’m going to live free here!”

“Yeah. That sounds good. Not a bad choice.”

“Right? Thanks for saying so— Why am I thanking you?! What are you even doing here, Julius?!”

“Need you ask? I plan to live here, too.”

“Huh?”

“Because your choice wasn’t half-bad,” Julius says with an approving smile.

No. No. No. No. This is bad. Won’t everything go to hell back home if Julius abandons Analia, too? I mean, he is the strongest of the Four Grand Magi and the commander of the Analian army.

Indifferent to my spiraling feelings, Julius places his book on the table, stands, and walks up to me.

“I look forward to the future with you, Elle. Let’s become good friends as fellow traitors.”

Hearing him say that and seeing his devious smile finally makes the situation clear to me.

“WHAT THE HEEEEEEEEELLLLL?!” I belt out the most unbecoming of shouts for a proper young lady.



I expressed my surprise over Julius’s unexpected decision with a string of unladylike curses before pulling myself together and sitting at the table nearest the door. Julius regally seats himself at the same table.

What in the world is he thinking? I can't help worrying about the state of Analia with the top Grand Magi missing.

"Won't all hell break loose if you leave Analia, Julius?" I ask. "What will happen to the war with Gaea?"

"Well, if it's a matter of hell breaking loose or not, it most assuredly will. But it doesn't matter now. On a more important note, I'm famished. Do you have anything to eat?"

"Oh, here are some cookies my chef Meide whipped up before leaving the manor, if you like."

"Yes, thank you. I'll gladly eat them," Julius says, accepting the cookies I hold out and bringing one to his mouth with all the class of a ruler. He slowly chews the cookie, savoring each bite. "Fascinating. Your servants always prepare palatable food," he observes, sounding quite satisfied. "There's very little medicinal taste."

"Right? Meide is amazing! Whatever she touches turns delicious. You certainly seem to have a sweet tooth, Julius. Never pinned you as the type."

"I wouldn't say I have a particular inclination toward sweets. It's just that everything we have ever eaten always had a distinct bitterness to it, don't you think? It appears I have a distaste for that."

"Yeah, Analia's food is disgusting because it's bitter like medicine. Not that you can do much about it when Analia's foodstuff is grown with magic potions. But it seems like you can whip up relatively tasty dishes with it if you know what you're doing. Everyone at my manor is from Gaea, so they handle real ingredients like proper chefs."

"I see," he says, savoring the sweetness of the cookies—which isn't what we should be doing right now!

"Can you stop being so easygoing for one second?! Two of the Four Grand Magi can't disappear together! Are you serious about leaving Analia, Julius?!"

"I am. Hence my presence here."

"You're serious... Won't Analia be doomed without you?!"

“Chaos will ensue with you gone. My leaving will merely amplify the chaos into greater chaos. Isn’t it unfair that it’s okay for you to leave but not me?”

No, well, when he puts it like that, it sounds unfair... I shoot him a spiteful glare and he just goes on enjoying the cookies with an air of innocence, unconcerned as unconcerned can be.

Some of the fight goes out of me with my sigh. I’m just as guilty of breaking away from Analia. It’s not my place to stop him.

“Whatever. I won’t make a fuss about you leaving Analia anymore. But why are you here?” I ask. “You even built houses... Those stone buildings were created with your magic, right?”

“I noticed the magic coming from your manor’s dungeon the day I escorted you home,” he openly shares. “I discovered the teleportation circle you drew there. Thus, I assumed you would use that circle to come here if you did indeed depart Analia. Don’t be bothered by the buildings I constructed in this area. They’re a present from me. You can call it a housewarming gift from a fellow resident.”

Why has he arbitrarily decided that we’re living here together? Did he feel lonely and discouraged abandoning his country by himself? I honestly felt that way until my servants’ decision to join me eased those concerns.

Learning that there’s a childish side to Julius has brought a smile to my face and silenced the irritation stirring in me. Thinking about it with a clear mind, I’m grateful Julius already prepared buildings that I had intended to build with magic myself.

But it’s despicable that he shrewdly picked the most luxurious mansion to be his home.

“All right. To be honest, the houses are a big help, and Analia’s got nothing to do with me anymore, so...I hope to be good neighbors with you. By the way, I can pick any house I want, right? You don’t mind if I make alterations, do you?” I ask, skipping excitedly over to the window. I take in the scenery beyond the glass.

Vast, infinite blue sky, majestic mountains, and stone houses dotting the

empty, green plains. It's kind of a strange sight when you look at it objectively. But I'm excited. This village will be my home.

All things considered, it's annoying that the building where Julius will live is bigger than the rest. I wonder if he'll let me alter another house to be even bigger with magic.

What area looks like it still has plenty of space around it...?

Julius quietly stands beside me while I'm sizing up the land.

"What are you talking about? This is your house, Elle."

"What? This huge mansion is my house? Then where will you live, Julius?"

"Here as well."

What is this former Grand Magi saying?

"Care to make sense of that for me?"

"What about it doesn't make sense? You and I are engaged. Engaged couples live together."

"Huh? Engaged? Our betrothal was selected by the Demon Lord—no, by the magic circle—as the optimal pairing. We've left Analia; our engagement is as good as null, right? Don't feel obligated to go through with this when we're both separating ourselves from Analia's rules."

It seems like Julius can't shake the habit of blindly following the Demon Lord's orders. I didn't expect him to dutifully hold to our engagement. Our betrothal is null. Annulled.

But it looks like my announcement is a shock to him. This is the first I've seen surprise flash across his face as he covers his mouth with his hand.

"I see. Now that you mention it, that's true. But..."

Seeing Julius painfully absorb what I said feels good for some reason. He can be pretty aloof most of the time, is a far better sorcerer than me, and tends to annoy me, but it seems like a piece of him can't get past the mentality that everything the Demon Lord says is "absolute!"—a mindset that has been burned into us both from growing up in Analia.

I pat him on the arm to say “Cheer up.” I understand how he feels. The Demon Lord was our everything until a few days ago. I totally get it’s not easy to accept what the Demon Lord really is. Well, at least I’ve mostly gotten over it! Yes indeed, I’ve successfully moved on.

“You saw how I reacted, but even I’ve decided to live free for myself now. I would at least like to choose my own husband! You should do the same, Julius! We’re finally free. It’s a waste to be bound to someone you don’t love,” I explain.

Julius is looking at me with the same surprised face.

“I see. Is that the way it works? ...I think I get the picture. You may choose anywhere to live. I personally wouldn’t mind living here together.”

“Really? Okay, then I pick that house!” I exclaim, pointing out the window at one of the stone buildings Julius built. It’s at the edge of the village, so there’s plenty of space to make additions.

“I’ll alter that house with my magic! I’m gonna make it even bigger and better than your mansion! See you later, Julius! I look forward to being neighbors! Thanks for the house!” I skip out of the room. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Julius’s face as dissatisfaction washes over it.

What’s he making that face for? Is he displeased? Seems more like depressed to me. Is he that upset about me building a bigger mansion than his?

Whatever. Not my problem. My house comes first! What kind of alterations should I make? I want to design the interior, too! I’m getting excited now!



TWO days after moving to the new land, gardener Sam approached me with a suggestion. “Would you mind if I turned the northeastern plains into a field?”

Sam is originally a farmer from Gaea. He’s someone I kidnapped like the rest, and he says that the quality of the soil around the village is suitable for planting fields. It’s a timely suggestion, since I just finished making additions to my house and carrying in my things and was starting to think that we need to secure more food for the future.

I brought a decent amount of supplies capable of getting us by for a while, but it will run out eventually. We have to become self-sufficient if we're going to rebuild our lives here.

I brought seeds and seedlings from Analia to make that happen. My plan to start anew in a different land is perfect!

Minds made up to cultivate a field, my former servants and I head outside together.

Following Sam's advice, I find a good place to turn into a field, and blow a fine breeze into the ground with wind magic to soften and loosen up the soil. Now just gently raking a hoe through the ground will dig up the soil and easily pull out the weeds.

Everyone's having fun sowing seeds in the prepared soil.

Watching them brings a sense of peace I haven't felt before.

"You actually eat food dropped into dirt?" Julius asks in a scandalized whisper, ruining my peaceful mood as he watches everyone planting in the field. "Filthy!" is written all over his scrunched-up face.

Did he grow up in a box or what?

Then again, without my past life's memories, I might've fainted when I saw the servants burying seeds in the ground.

All the crops in Analia are grown in magically enriched fluids. Pure and clean culture crops grown systematically, accurately, mechanically, and—quite literally—like magic. Truthfully, everything tastes horrible. When eaten raw, the food retains the bitter medicinal taste of the fluid it grew in.

But many of the people from Analia don't care because they have never tasted good food before. Everyone lives by the idea that a meal only need supply them with the nutrients necessary for survival.

In my case, food made by my servants has given me a discriminating palate, making it so I can't stand eating Analia's food raw.

Even those vegetables from Analia that taste like chewing on aspirin come out pretty tasty when my chef Meide gets to work on them. But I was surprised to

find the servants had secretly planted a field in a corner of my estate back in Analia because the food was unpalatable to people from Gaea.

Even now, they're tilling and planting fields around the village we just moved into with the skill and speed of veteran farmers.

"Hehehe. You'll get your first taste of something delicious by growing it in the ground, Julius," I explain, in the best of moods spurred on by the thought of being able to eat good food again. Julius doesn't look convinced, though.

"But it's coming from the dirt? Insects and other nasty things will crawl all over it."

Sheltered boy. Though I understand how he feels. I'm not resistant to the idea, thanks to my past memories. I'm actually more freaked out and scared that I've been eating food grown in some strange fluid I still don't quite understand.

"Didn't you say the food Meide made was delicious, Julius? Crops grown in the dirt are SUPER delicious even when eaten raw!"

"Super delicious, you say...?" Julius mutters, placing his right hand thoughtfully under his chin. "The food prepared by the servants at your manor was undeniably of good taste. I'll overlook the unsanitary conditions for that reason. However, be sure to wash it thoroughly when you remove anything from the soil."

It seems like I persuaded him, but calling it unsanitary conditions is quite the comment...

"We'll obviously wash everything off with water!"

"Water isn't enough. Use purifying magic potions—"

"Hell no!"

Precious fresh vegetables will become medicinal again! Julius is totally the kind of guy who would wash his rice with soap.

"Leave the crops to Mistress Elle here! I'll show you what real vegetables look and taste like," I say, confidently claiming responsibility for our food production. Julius nods reluctantly.

Like a child playing in a sandbox for the first time, Julius begins to play with the soil in the fields and imitates the servants, who are hard at work.

As for me, I'm making farming tools with magic at everyone's request.

Julius, can't you help me instead? You're more useful here. I'm terrible at the more refined magic this kind of work requires, whereas Julius can pull it off in a blink of an eye.

Julius notices me resentfully eyeing him engaged in farm work and strolls over to me. Somebody's enjoying himself.

"Elle, how long does it take for vegetables to mature in dirt? They reach maturation in about a week in the culture fluid. Is it about the same for dirt?" Julius asks, looking with pleasure upon the ground where he planted seeds with his own two hands.

It seems like he had a good time working the fields...

But this guy is so silly. There's no way field crops will be ready for harvest in a week. Fluid crops are another story.

"It depends on the crop, but leafy vegetables that grow quickly will maybe be ready in about a month or two...", I venture.

"That's about what it takes," Canna says, backing me up from where she's been helping organize the tools I've created so far.

Julius expresses his surprise by opening his eyes so wide they might fall out. Silly guy. He's become so expressive since coming here. Where did the frigid edge that earned him a reputation as the Prince of Glacial Beauty go?

"What are we going to do about food until it's ready? You didn't bring enough to last us that long, right?"

"We're all good. This is a mountainside village. We can live off the natural blessings of the mountain. Also, while it's a ways away, there's a town in these parts that we can restock from."

"...Live off the mountain? Are you suggesting we eat things that have fallen on the ground and have been beaten up by the elements...?" Julius nervously asks.

That's exactly what we will be eating. Don't look so grossed out, sheltered

boy. Get used to it already.

“You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to, Julius. But the food that grows on the mountain is *really* delicious!” I emphasize.

“It’s *really* delicious...? I see no alternative method—I must partake in this mountain food with you,” he says with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

This guy is quite the glutton.

Why do I get the feeling he’s imagining just fruit, nuts, and herbs as the only food we’ll be procuring from the mountain? He won’t pass out on me if I tell him we’re going to hunt boars and bears for meat, will he? He was practically raised in a greenhouse, like everyone else in Analia.

Just imagining the normally coldhearted Julius shaking as he whines “Hunting is barbaric! Scary!” gets me to look at him with a devious smirk.

“By the way, the mountain blessing is more than just fruits, nuts, and plants. We’re going to hunt boars and deer, too!”

Mwahahaha! Lemme see your face twist in fear, Julius!

I worded it in such a way to get that reaction out of him, but his expression remains unfazed.

“I see. We certainly will need to procure meat and other necessities from animals. I’ll join the hunters,” he offers, as if hunting is perfectly natural to him.

Huh. This isn’t the reaction I was hoping for!

“Do you actually understand what hunting is? To hunt means that you are going to do *that*! You know, killing and skinning boars and deer! Blood will spray everywhere! It’ll smell! Can you kill a living thing, Julius?”

“Hmm? Need you purposely confirm such a thing with me? You know who I am. I’m the former commander of the Demon Lord’s Army. I’m used to killing the living.”

Oh...right. I keep forgetting Julius was the strongest of the coldhearted and ruthless Four Grand Magi. He doesn’t want to eat food that’s fallen on the ground but is used to killing... What a detestable thing to grow accustomed to.



AFTER that conversation, Julius said he wanted to try fruit from the wilderness about once every three minutes, so we took someone familiar with foraging with us up the mountain.

“These are wild strawberries. They are sweet and terribly tasty,” explains old man Anzef as he picks a strawberry.

Anzef used to be a hunter before working at my manor, and he’s incredibly knowledgeable about the mountain’s bounty.

I pick wild strawberries on my knees alongside Anzef and place them in a wicker basket. Anzef is a genius at finding food in the wild, and when he spots a berry in the distance, he says, “There are some over there as well.” He’s awesome. Thanks to him, my basket is full of berries ranging in color from purple to black.

I’m looking at my full basket with satisfaction when long, slender fingers steal three wild strawberries from it.

Hey...! I follow the hand to its owner to find a certain someone tossing the strawberries in their mouth and chewing on them with the contentment of a cat batting a mouse.

“Anzef is right. Wild strawberries taste good.”

“Hey! Julius! Don’t eat them!”

“Why not? You just picked three more.”

“If you keep eating them every time I pick more, we’ll never have enough!”

“It’s not my fault. Blame the mountain for producing too many delicacies.”

He just blamed it on the mountain! How does this guy’s brain work?! This is the same person who hesitated over eating freshly picked wild strawberries when we first got here, exclaiming, “You can eat it without washing it first?!” Since his first fearful bite, he’s become an expert food snatcher.

I hide the basket behind me to prevent Julius from stealing another handful. No more for him! I’m gonna have Meide bake me a cake using lots of berries.

Julius's shoulders droop when I put the basket out of his reach. Is he a child or what?

Undisturbed by our war of the strawberries, our guide Anzef crouches by a different food source and beckons us with a wave.

Julius and I head over to him and look at the mushrooms he's pointing to.

"This is an edible mushroom. It has umami and makes good soup stock," Anzef explains, picking the whitish mushroom from the root.

"Does it? Then I'll lend you a hand," Julius says, sounding self-important as he sets about helping Anzef pick mushrooms.

Julius has been strangely hyper and overly excited ever since we came to the mountain. He's like a kid going on his first picnic hike.

"Anzef...how about this one? Can we eat it?" Julius asks, holding up a brown mushroom.

"Not that one." Anzef shakes his head. "It's poisonous."

"Fascinating. I thought it looked like the edible mushroom you pointed out..."

"It's a different type even though they look similar. The color of the umbrella-like caps is exactly the same, but see how this one has white warts on it? The ones with these warts are poisonous."

"I see. There's more to mushrooms than meets the eye," Julius murmurs as he stares at the fungus.

I'm glad he seems to enjoy harvesting mushrooms just as much as berries.

It's nearing evening by the time we return to the village after picking fox grapes, wild apples, watercress, herbs, and other edible foods growing on the mountain.

"You brought back a lot, Lady Elle."

"Yep! All thanks to Anzef!"

"You've made this old man's day by enjoying my lessons, Lady Elle," Anzef says with a smile, making me extra happy.

"Hehe. I'm so glad everyone came with me. I couldn't have done anything on

my own.”

“We are all very happy to have accompanied you as well, Lady Elle. All of us have been betrayed by the people of Gaea before. We are apprehensive about living within Gaea’s borders again, but...also feel just as blessed to be back in our homeland,” Anzef says, turning his eyes toward the village.

“Everyone can keep on smiling because of you, Lady Elle,” he adds, the corners of his eyes softening as he smiles with fatherly affection.

In the direction he’s looking I see everyone having fun in the field and laughing without reserve. Someone notices us and waves.

“Lady Elle and Lord Julius have returned!” Anzef announces, waving in return.

Being welcomed back with open arms and broad smiles brings a smile to my face as well.

“You’re loved, Elle,” Julius says at my side.

I’m loved...?

Those two words feel so peculiar to me that I return Julius’s gaze. I’ve lived till now thinking I was loved by the Demon Lord. It was reassuring and brought happiness to think that someone cared for me.

But the Demon Lord isn’t real. All that exists is a magic circle trying to turn us into the perfect puppets. So I started to think that I’ve never been loved by anyone in my life...

But was I? I’m loved? By someone else? There have been people who really see me and care about me.

Not some unknown, far away symbol holding the title of Demon Lord, but people who are always with me and smiling at me.

Is this true joy?

I want to live happily together with my favorite people from now on. This is different from just obeying some unknown entity’s orders without questioning them. This is different from making myself believe that happiness is what the Demon Lord says will make me happy.

This is happiness I chose and found for myself. Maybe this is what it means to be free. I want to continue having this freedom!

“I like everyone, too. I love them...,” I unconsciously say out loud.

Julius’s eyes go round.

Ugh. I think I just blurted out something pretty high on the embarrassing scale. I quickly look away from him.

And then I feel his hand on my head. Startled by how gently he’s stroking my hair, I look up at his face again. He’s turned that beautiful smile capable of bewitching anyone who sees his handsome face in my direction.

“Elle, I also—”

“Lady Elle! Welcome back!”

“C-Canna! I’m home.”

Whatever Julius was trying to say to me was buried under Canna’s loud voice as she ran over to us with a smile.

What was he trying to say...? I want to ask him to repeat himself, but an overly excited Canna won’t stop talking my ear off.

“Listen to this, Lady Elle! We thought up this village’s name while you were away!”

“The village’s name?”

“Yes. It’s inconvenient without a name. So everyone got together and voted on what we thought was best. Oh, but have you already decided on a name for the village, Lady Elle?”

“Nope, I haven’t. What did you guys choose?”

“We had a lot of good suggestions, but all of the villagers decided we wanted to go with something we all love and adore the most...”

Something everyone loves and adores the most? Like meat? They all love meat, so...Meaty Village? Ugh, that’s wrong on so many levels. No thanks.

“We ended up wanting it to be Elle Village most. What do you think, my lady?”

Heh. Elle Village, is it? What a relief, it's not Meaty Village. Or Village of Meat. Or Meatland. I see, I see. Elle— What?

“Elle?! That's me!” I cry.

“Yes, it is! The village is named after our favorite person!”

“What?! You sure my name is good enough? I mean, this village belongs to everyone...”

“I don't see any problems with it. If you have to live somewhere, it's most comfortable if it's named after something you're attached to,” Julius says, throwing in his support, so I try to give it a chance in my spinning head.

Elle Village—it's extra embarrassing because everyone said it's the name of the person they love and adore most. It makes me all shy. But...but...I'm so happy.

“It's the name we came up with. Do you not like it?” chef Meide asks.

Everyone has gathered around me without my realizing it.

Aah, I knew it. I love everyone here.

What do I have to hesitate about? I take a deep breath.

“Very well. I'll grant this village the honor of my noble name! From today on, this will be Elle Village! I, the almighty Elle, shall protect this village from whatever may come! That's right! For I am Elle Falmil Gracedane. I love Elle Village the most! And Elle Village loves me most!” I declare in a loud and clear voice.

Everyone cheers around me.

And that is how Elle Village was established on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Gaea.

Interlude: Laurent of the Desolated Village

MY younger sister isn't in good health. She spends most of her time bedridden and wheezing in pain.

"Emilie. Look, I've brought food. Can you eat?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says in a fragile voice and sits up in bed. "Thank you, Brother."

My sister is adorable when her cheeks dimple like that, but it's too painful for me to look at her sunken face now.

Emilie accepts the wooden bowl and slowly sips the soup made of nothing more than a little grain simmered in water. I would love most of all to provide my sickly sister with something better to eat, but this is the best I can do for her.

I bite down on my lower lip, mortified.

"Aren't you going to eat, Laurent?" Emilie asks in a rasping voice.

I force my cracked lips into a smile. "I'm good."

"But...then you'll stay hungry. I'm full now. Eat the rest so I don't waste it," she suggests, concern lacing her feeble voice. She holds the bowl of soup up to me.

Emilie must still be starving... She's grown up to be a sweet and caring girl.

Our mother died of an illness when I was eight and Emilie was three. I took care of my sister on behalf of my father, who spent more time on ranches for work than at home.

Emilie is my adorable little sister. She's the only family I have left now that our father has fallen to the level of a common bandit and abandoned us to our fate. I want to keep her safe. But no matter how much I wish to do that, her body is weakening by the day. And her coughing fits are getting much worse.

Some sort of freak cold seems to be going around the village because the

other children are suffering from the same symptoms as my sister.

How can I protect my younger sister and the villagers who remained when I can't even obtain farming tools to plow the fields? Is the only answer to steal from innocent people as Father and the other men did?

"I ate my share earlier. This is all for you," I persuade weakly, forcing the corners of my lips up in a smile.

Truth is, I haven't eaten a thing. I'm starving. But this is about the only thing I can do for my sister.

Emilie seems to have fallen for my story. "Oh, okay," she says, bringing the bowl of watery soup to her lips.

That's how it should be. Emilie needs to gain strength now more than ever. I can still endure.

"Okay, I'm going back to the field. Call me if you need anything," I tell her.

"Mm-hmm." She nods.

I stand, leave the run-down shack, and look around outside. The houses in this village are in shambles after the bandit attack. Gaping holes fill the roofs, cracks run through the walls, and repairs aren't even a possibility at this point. The land in front of me is more of a dust bowl than anything resembling a field.

Even so, I must prevail.

I grab hold of the branch leaning against the house. I picked it up as a substitute tool.

All metal farming tools were taken by the government to be used in the war efforts. The Kingdom of Gaea, where we live, is apparently at war with the neighboring Demon Lord kingdom.

I thought our farming tools would be returned to us after the war, but so far there's no sign of that happening, and the wooden tools they gave us in return have rotted away.

What I have now is just a stick. It's all I have to till the fields and produce something delicious for Emilie to eat... My mind is willing, but my body feels like lead.

A black fog hangs over the surrounding area as I'm heading into the field. It's always like this. I don't know what this black fog enshrouding the village is, but the other villagers can't see it.

Lately, I feel like the black fog is growing thicker by the day. At this rate, the village is going to be swallowed by this darkness.

No, maybe it has already been swallowed whole.

The fields turned wild and barren, the adults became bandits, and disease has spread like wildfire. The black haze is too thick; everything before my eyes looks darker than night even though it's daytime...

"...I want to see...the light," I whisper, thrusting the stick into the ravaged field to turn over the hard dirt.

Just a little glimmer is fine. I just want a light to shine through this bleak darkness.

Act 2: Enjoying the Slow Life in Gaea

Chapter 4: The Village Overrun by Magic Particles

TODAY'S plan is to travel to a big town and stock up on ingredients such as salt and sugar. The town is a good distance from Elle Village, but it's just a hop and a skip away with my magic. I'll be taking along Canna and Jasper, a former Gaeian merchant who's been there before.

Thinking we need something to fly on with this many people traveling through the skies, I scribble a magic circle on a fancy red carpet, turning it into a magic carpet.

A magic flying carpet sounds so romantic!

"You stand out in a crowd, Lady Elle. Please be sure to wear the hood on your cloak," Canna advises, wrapping the cloak around my shoulders and pulling the hood over my hair to hide me in the folds of fabric.

Analiens have flamboyant hair and eye colors. A girl with bright-red hair showing up in a quaint Gaeian town will definitely stand out.

"Elle, where are you going?" Julius walks over just as we sit on the magic carpet, ready for takeoff.

"Heading to town to stock up on food and supplies. We still have plenty in reserve, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Very well. I'll come, too," he decides on the spot and steps onto the carpet.

"Don't. Protect the village instead!"

"I've set up magic defenses around the village. Nothing will happen, and if it does, I'll be immediately alerted."

"Seriously? But you draw attention to yourself like a magic anomaly. I just know trouble will find us if you go into town," I argue.

Julius cocks his head and looks me over from my red tresses down to my red

slippers. “Trouble is more likely to be started by you, Elle.”

“I’m the poster child for common sense! I won’t cause any problems!”

That’s his counterargument? I’d never start trouble! The nerve of him!

“Now, now. Let’s all get along, children. Having you both along for shopping is reassuring. Besides, Lord Julius is not the kind of man who will passively listen just because you turned him down,” old man Jasper mediates.

Well, he isn’t wrong there.

I reluctantly nod and allow Julius on board. And just like that, Canna, Jasper, Julius, and I form the Shopping Excursion Troop.

Julius can be our pack mule, since he forced my hand.



WE fly straight to Eugstein, the largest town in the region. My first trip into town has me all excited!

But it’s a bit of a letdown seeing how lifeless Eugstein is. This is supposed to be the biggest and best town in the region? Kinda lackluster.

I exchange jewels and precious gems into Gaea’s currency and head to the market to purchase what we need.

Speaking of markets, they’re normally the source of life and activity in human settlements and yet...this one is just as dead as the rest of the town... Dark clouds hang over the locals. There are so few people despite it being the biggest market for hundreds of miles.

In the spookily bleak and quiet market, I purchase seasonings such as sugar and salt, and various preserved foods. I pile each purchase on top of the others in an ever-growing mountain for my pack mule to carry.

Yet he carries the tower of wrapped goods with the artistic balance of an acrobat and an irritatingly unruffled expression. This can only mean one thing...

“Julius, you’re using magic!” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Yes, I am,” he openly admits. “I can carry much more than this for you. Buy as much as you want.”

“I was gonna buy more without your permission, thank you! Can you quit doing things to draw attention to us?! Like it or not, we are Analian fugitives. Do you want to deal with the chaos that will ensue if we’re discovered? Sorcerers are few and far between in Gaea as it is...”

Carrying a tower of goods that’s three times his height is liable to draw every eye in town. That said, it hasn’t drawn a single look yet.

“Lady Elle is right, Lord Julius. Please share some of the load with me,” Jasper suggests, holding out his arms.

“No, you needn’t trouble yourself.” Julius shakes his head. “This tower can’t be seen by others.”

“It can’t? Did you cast a spell on it...?”

I quickly open Analyze in my right eye and focus on the packages Julius has.

Sure enough, stability, antigravity, and light reflection spells are actively working together to hide and lighten the load.

I didn’t notice him casting... When did he do it? When did he have the time to write the magic circle? Or did he omit the circle altogether? What about the incantation? Did he activate the spells without it? He cast such intricate and complicated spells in an instant? And I never sensed him do it.

It makes the inescapable difference in our power all the more painfully apparent.

Honestly, I just wanted to make Julius carry so much stuff until he complained “It’s too heavy-wevy!” with a pathetic look on his face so I could make fun of him.

Gosh darn it! I’m so frustrated. I can’t shake the feeling that his face is saying, “My oh my, you aren’t even capable of this trivial act? Should’ve expected as much from the weakest Grand Magi.”

“I-I’m capable of doing that, too, if I try. I know! Why don’t we have all the packages float in the air around us while we’re at it?! It’ll be much more convenient that way! Watch this, Julius!” I proclaim and commence chanting a spell along the same lines as what I cast on the magic carpet.

“Elle, I wouldn’t. You still haven’t adapted to the magic particles in this town...”

I complete my spell while Julius is trying to convince me of something or other.

Uh, that’s not right. This doesn’t feel the same as usual. My magic won’t stop flowing forward. But it’s too late now.

The spell I meant to cast on just Julius’s packages spreads to the surrounding area. Apples, fish, vegetables, and other merchandise being sold in the market launch into the air like a jet blasting off.

Er, that’s new...

The quiet marketplace roars alive with confusion over the sudden supernatural occurrence.

Crap.

I frantically deactivate my spell. All the wares dancing in the air return to their former locations, but the market uproar isn’t quelled.

“Elle, you really need to listen to people more,” Julius groans, pressing his fingers to his forehead.

“I-I thought I could pull it off!”

I actually did pull it off, to be precise! It worked, but the area of effect was too wide or something like that!

“Either way, we should make haste from this place, Lady Elle. We bought most of what we need, so let’s just head home!”

At Canna’s urging, we run from the market.

By the time we arrive where I hid the magic carpet, I’m gasping for air because I’ve got zero stamina. Running hurts...! I don’t run often, so my lungs and legs feel like they are on fire...

I glance over at Julius. He’s standing upright with his usual too-cool-for-you look. He has a surprising amount of stamina.

Such worthless thoughts are running through my head as we pile on top of

the magic carpet and fly off toward Elle Village.

Moving with the chilly breeze in my face for a while has helped cool off my head. How could I have caused such a scene during my first precious visit to a real town?

“Um, I’m sorry...about earlier,” I sincerely apologize to the others. I feel bad for rushing everyone home when they might’ve had other things to shop for. I really did think I could pull it off, though!

“It’s all right, Lady Elle. Going through an experience like that is a kind of fun in its own right.”

“It certainly is. You are terribly adorable when you’re panicking, Lady Elle.”

Hearing Canna and Jasper say that is a huge weight off my chest.

I nervously glance at Julius. In my opinion, exasperation is written all over his handsome face. I can just hear his internal thoughts cursing me as the “disgrace of the Grand Magi.”

“Wh-What’s with that look, huh?! I know you’re thinking I’m the disgrace of the Grand Magi! Hmph!” I stick my tongue out at him. “Just so you know, you’re way more of a disgrace than me!”

“I wasn’t thinking that, but...” Julius gives me a quizzical look.

“But what?”

“I was just thinking you’re genuinely cute and straightforward.”

.....

HUH?!

“Wh-What’s gotten into you?! C-Can you please not tease me by saying those kinda things?! Stupid Julius! Disgrace of the Four Grand Magi!”

“I’m not teasing you.”

Just shut up! I put that feeling into the glare I direct at him. He shrugs and takes a sip of water from his flask.

Canna and Jasper are smiling at us like they want to say, “Oh my, you two get along like two peas in a pod!”

Getting all embarrassed, I turn my face away with a “Hmph.”

Stupid Julius, running your mouth about things you don't really feel with a straight face! How could you call me cute of all things when you have zero interest in me?

Once Julius meets Saint Aela, he's sure to fall head over heels in love with her. That's his destiny. I wish he wouldn't get my hopes up like this when he's fated to fall for another woman someday. Julius is good-looking, so of course my heart races around him...just because he has handsome face! Only his looks are good!

Well, his personality isn't too bad, either... No, no, no! Stop! Bad girl! Julius will someday treat me as the disgrace of the Grand Magi, and he already has a soul mate out there waiting for him! Enough pining after this guy!

“At any rate, I was surprised to see the state of Eugstein since my last visit. I didn't expect to see the biggest trade town in the northeast to have fallen on such hard times,” Jasper mutters with a grim face while I'm in the middle of obsessing over Julius calling me cute.

That reminds me, Jasper used to be a Gaeian merchant. He had mentioned coming to Eugstein many times for trade and even showed us around town.

“It wasn't always like that?” I ask out of curiosity.

“It was prosperous several years ago,” Jasper explains in somber tones. “The war with Analia probably has a lot to do with it— Ah, my apologies! I swear I am not trying to bad-mouth Analia, Lady Elle...”

“It's okay if you are. I've severed all connections with Analia now...,” I confess to calm him while I reflect on my past self.

I was a commander of the fourth rank within the Analian army that went to war with Gaea, and I knew absolutely nothing about our opponents. Correction: I never thought to learn about them. Granted, I did think they were fools for futilely resisting the joy of being ruled by the Demon Lord.

Naïve child that I was, I never once thought for myself. I was nothing more than a machine moving to make the Demon Lord's—the magic circle's—ideals come to fruition.

I steal a peek at Julius. Did he know the state of things in Gaea? Maybe it's just me, but he looks more dejected than usual, like a shadow has been cast over him.

"I was really lucky to be picked up by you, Lady Elle. My life would have been over if not for you... To be honest, I didn't have the will to continue living in Gaea."

"You used to be a merchant, right?" I say, trying to recall the day I abducted him. "I remember finding you near a broken wagon."

What events led to the moment I brought him home with me? I practically kidnapped anyone I found looking sad and miserable, so I know squat about their backgrounds.

"I was already at the bottom of the pit of despair that day. I was out peddling my wares after my wife had just died of illness, when bandits attacked me and I lost everything. I barely managed to survive and was hanging on to life by a thread when you descended from the skies and landed before me, Lady Elle. I haven't forgotten a single detail about that moment till this day. You suddenly appeared and said, 'You belong to me starting today! Meaning you belong to the Demon Lord! So put your heart at ease! I shall make you happy!' And then you kidnapped me without letting me get a word in edgewise."

Oops, I said something like that? And, Jasper, please don't use a high-pitched voice to repeat the things I said. It's creepy.

"Haha, that's nostalgic. Lady Elle said the same thing to me."

Oh, past me, did you have to repeat the same thing to Canna? Where's your originality?!

"It seems like everyone Elle abducted were unfortunate souls Gaea had turned a blind eye on. Is that right?" Julius inquires of Canna.

"Yes, that's right," Canna says with a nod. "All of us had lost hope in Gaea. Lady Elle showed up at our darkest moment. She was so adorable and cute I thought I had already died and an angel had come for me."

Canna is calling me an angel without even blushing!

“I’m a far cry...from an angel. My actions had little thought behind them... I simply took people I found looking hopeless... But I’m super lucky. I should be hated for whisking you all away without your consent, but you have accepted me with open arms.”

“We are the ones who are super lucky, Lady Elle,” Canna emphasizes, making me feel extra bashful.

“Luck isn’t the only factor,” Julius puts out there.

“It’s not? What do you mean?”

“You likely sensed the magic particles in them, Elle.”

“Magic particles? Aren’t those the base of all magic?”

We use magic when we cast spells. Magic particles make up the base of magic. They’re invisible to the naked eye, but I learned from a young age that the particles dissolve into food and the air, and that we can cast spells by redirecting the magic converted from the particles inside our bodies through magic circles and incantations.

Magic particles are an absolute necessity for us sorcerers.

“Correct. And magic particles come from negative human emotions, such as sadness, suffering, despair, and jealousy.”

What’s indispensable for sorcerers is born from negative human emotion...?

“I’ve never heard that before.”

I know I don’t act like it, but I am one of the Four Grand Magi of the sorcerers’ kingdom. I’ve studied enough about sorcery and magic to last three lifetimes. And someone of my caliber has never even heard rumors of what he said.

“Only a handful of people have noticed the source of magic particles. After all, it’s not included in Analia’s curriculum. We were gathered as toddlers in the facility and taught about sorcery, but our lessons didn’t cover everything, and it’d be wise to assume not everything we were taught was correct.”

Sincerity burns in Julius’s eyes. He isn’t lying.

I see. He has a point. We grew up under the magic circle’s control. It’s not

strange for us to have reached this point in our lives unaware of hidden truths.

“I was full of fear and suffering before you showed up, Lady Elle,” Canna adds to the conversation. “Does that mean Lady Elle reacted to the magic particles born from my misery and that’s what led her to me?” she asks Julius.

“That is exactly what happened. Sorcerers are extra sensitive to magic and the particles it consists of. Train enough as a sorcerer and you can see the flow of magic. Only once in a blue moon is someone able to see magic particles. But we can sense them. It’s highly likely Elle’s subconscious reacted to the magic particle effusion.”

When he puts it like that, it makes sense why everyone I kidnapped turned out to have been forsaken by Gaea. So it was more than just luck, coincidence, and good intuition.

And if what Julius said is true, then...

“...Okay, so if magic particles are born of negative emotions, then the Demon Lord is purposely dragging out the war with Gaea to increase the particle production?”

The magic circle I found in the Demon Lord’s room was working toward a country where magic would eventually control the people it urged into furthering the development of magic. A huge source of magic—of magic particles—is necessary to make that happen.

“Elle...you are surprisingly smart.”

Julius’s comment is made even ruder by how surprised he looks.

“It shouldn’t be a surprise! I was a member of the Four Grand Magi, too, you know! It’s only natural that I’m smart! I obviously have the ability to make correct guesses!”

“Hehehe. Lady Elle often acts on her instincts, but she surprisingly uses her head a lot, too.”

Even Canna used the word *surprisingly* with me...

“As Elle said, the Demon Lord went to war with Gaea to increase the number of magic particles. The only reason why the war has dragged on between Gaea

and the overwhelmingly more powerful Analia is because the Demon Lord always gives the order to delay the killing blow when it counts,” Julius explains.

I knew it. The whole war has seemed strange for a while now. Analia and Gaea are on completely different scales when it comes to military might, and yet the war never ends.

“Did my spell go out of control because there’s more magic particles in that town than elsewhere?”

“Most likely,” Julius confirms. “As it stands, your body naturally stores quadruple the amount of magic compared with other sorcerers. You absorbed even more by breathing the air in town, creating more magic within your body. Using magic without compensating for the difference when your body is overflowing with it will result in what you saw back there.”

Is that what happens? I did have a similar sensation to feeling full after eating a hearty meal since setting foot in Eugstein. Actually, I feel the same kinda fullness right now.

Hmm? Something below us is bothering me. Running with that feeling, I peer over the side of the flying carpet. There’s a small...village?

“Look over there. There’s a village...”

“Oh, you’re right, my lady. There is a small village. Ah, but from the look of it, the fields are barren and ravaged...”

“The magic particles...,” Julius mutters with a bitter look.

“Something about it is pulling on me. Hey, I want to stop here. I want to get off at that village,” I say, overcome with the impulse that I can’t just pass by.

“What do you plan to do there?” Julius asks, a stringent edge to his voice.

“I don’t know. But I’m bothered.”

“You’re bothered because magic particles are overflowing from the village. Particles gathering in those numbers can only mean they’re facing a dire crisis. What do you hope to achieve by going to such a place?”

“I don’t—”

“Let me remind you that we are Analian fugitives living in hiding. We should avoid all contact with nearby villages.”

“I know! I know...that. I-It’s not like I’m planning on doing anything rash. I just can’t shake this troubled feeling, so I wanna take a look. I’m just gonna take a little peek!” I promise and give the order for the carpet to descend from the sky.

“We can only hope it will end at that,” Julius says under his breath. I pretend I didn’t hear him.



STUNNED is the first thing I feel after landing near the village.

The fields are desolate husks, and the villagers’ homes are falling apart. Can people really live in a place like this? I do sense some life. People are holding their breath inside those crumbling sheds. Though their numbers are small...

As I’m observing the desolated place, I sense someone move, and I turn my eyes toward them.

A skinny boy, about ten years old, is poking the ground with a thick tree branch.

Is he a villager? He’s the first person I’ve seen outside.

When we step closer, the boy turns around and eyes us suspiciously. His body is withering away, and the dark-brown hair that’s common among Gaeans falls in tatters past his shoulders. Soot covers his young face. His ravaged eyes look at us for all of a second before he turns away and starts poking at the ground again.

“What did you come for? Find another place to hit if you’re bandits. There’s nothing left to steal from this village,” he mutters in a dry and cracking voice while he continues playing in the dirt.

“We’re not bandits. We don’t want to steal from you... What are you doing anyway?” I ask.

“Tilling the field.”

“Tilling the field? You’re trying to turn over the dirt with just a branch?”

“I am” is all he says and then silently thrusts the stick into the ground and digs up the hard dirt.

“...You don’t have a hoe or any other farming tools?” I venture.

What the boy has is just a stick that’s far from suitable for plowing soil.

“The wooden farming tools left in this village quickly rotted and no longer work.”

The tools were made of wood that rapidly decomposes? I frown. They don’t have any made with iron or copper? Or decay-resistant lumber?

“Lady Elle,” Jasper calls my name when I fall silent. He’s looking at the boy thrusting his stick into the ground over and over again with a sorrowful expression. “Iron and copper are generally used for Gaea’s farming tools as well. However, I heard the king confiscated all the tools from outlying villages because he believes Gaea needs more weapons to fight Analia. The kingdom is melting down the metal to create weaponry.”

Gaea confiscated them all for extra metal to make weapons? And gave back rotting wooden tools in their place?

I take another look around the village. Barren fields, stifling, stale air. And most notable...

“Doesn’t there seem to be a serious lack of people? Not enough villagers compared to the number of houses,” I observe out loud.

“Bandits pillaged the village a while back,” the boy responds without looking at me.

“They did? Then were most of the villagers killed by bandits?”

“Some were killed. But most are gone for another reason. The majority of men left alive became bandits themselves. Bandits took everything from this already poor place. The men left to pillage another village in order to get back what was taken from them. And then they never came back.”

My mind ceases to function for a whole second because of what he said. But I carefully pick my words to make sense of it.

“...They left to attack an innocent village to get back what was taken?”

“They did. We were unjustly robbed. So it doesn’t matter if we rob others...is what my pa said,” the boy says, looking at me again.

Hatred burns in his sandy-brown eyes, stealing my breath away.

“...You didn’t go with them?” Julius asks.

The boy furrows his brow until deep creases form and the flames of hatred burn even brighter in his eyes.

“Like hell I’d go! Pa was hella wrong! Just because someone stole from you doesn’t give you the right to steal from someone else!” he declares with an edge of disgust as the setting sun frames him from behind.

He’s so bright I have to squint. But I can’t tear my eyes away from him. This boy with his unkempt, matted hair and filthy clothing is absolutely beautiful.

I want him. Whatever it takes, I want him. This is a familiar feeling. I felt the same way when I kidnapped Canna and Jasper and the rest.

“...Hey, boy, do the rest of the villagers feel the same as you?” I ask.

“Probably. Only women, children, and the elderly are left anyway... What about it?”

I face the suspicious boy with a welcoming smile. “I like you, boy! Say, would you like to come to another village?”

“Huh? Do you know what you’re asking? If I could’ve gone somewhere else, I would’ve long ago—what’s with you people anyway? What did you come here for if you’re not bandits?” The deeply distrustful boy turns a skeptical eye on me.

Hey, don’t jump to conclusions! I’m not scheming anything evil. Oh, but I guess I haven’t told him who we are yet. He’ll relax once I do.

I clear my throat and plant my hands on my hips.

“I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? Listen and rejoice, boy! I’m the mayor of a village brimming with love, courage, hope, kindness...and whatever other super awesome feels there are! I love Elle Village most! And Elle Village loves me most! For I am the grand sorceress Elle Falmil Gracedane! So set your mind at ease, for I am here to make you happy!” I proclaim, head held high,

chest puffed out.



The boy stares at me with eyes rounder than the full moon.

Behind me I hear Julius's exasperated "I knew that was coming" and Canna's excited exclamation of "That's Lady Elle for you!"

Yet the boy responds to my epochal offer to make him happy with a petulant scowl.

"So you're kidnappers!" the boy concludes, daringly brandishing his stick at me.

Uh-oh...did I make him totally see us as the enemy now? Was it a dumb idea to let my excitement get the better of me and blurt the first thing that came to mind? B-But that's how bad I wanted to make him a resident of Elle Village!

"I-I'm no kidnapper! Okay, I am a kidnapper. But I won't sell you off! I just want you to come to my village! There are only twenty of us so far, but it's an amazingly awesome village!"

"Are you gonna work us like slaves there? Won't do ya any good. Most of the folks here aren't capable of working, you know. Even my kid sister is bedridden...," he says, keeping a wary distance from me.

"Your sister is sick?"

"She is! Horribly sick! So you won't gain anything by kidnapping the villagers!"

"I'm not trying to gain anything. I just took a liking to you... Oh, I know! I've got a high-end healing elixir on me. It's a special batch whipped up by the DemiOracle. I'll cure your sister with it! Then you'll trust me, right? Show me the way, boy!" I tell him my brilliant idea and receive an even more barbed look in return.

Scary boy. He's like a wild dog.

"Like hell I'd believe that load of crap. What are you gonna do to my sister when you find her?!" the boy cries, running at me with the raised branch.

I'm startled by the boy's unexpected rebellion, but Julius seizes his hand before his attack can reach me. He snatches the branch from the boy's grip and shoves him away.

“Nngh...,” he groans, falling back on the dirt.

Dumbfounded, I stare down at him. Julius stands beside me with a look that says, “Whoops, I dirtied my hands shoving away a boring creature.”

...Well, crap. This makes me into the bad guy. One of the Four Grand Magi of the Demon Lord’s Army. This is totally a scene of two Grand Magi bullying a helpless child.

The boy is glaring at me like I’m the bane of his existence. Like he’s trying to pierce through me with those strong, burning eyes. But his shoulders are trembling. He must be scared.

Yeah, he’s definitely scared. Bandits came out of nowhere and stole everything that mattered to him, and then his dad went out to commit the same crime. First he was betrayed by outsiders, then by his loved ones, and now we show up out of the blue asking him to trust us when he knows nothing about us. Of course he wouldn’t believe me.

What should I do? It’s not a good idea to kidnap him when he’s so against it. But...I’m fairly positive everyone in this village will die if I leave them here...

“Lady Elle, please follow your heart and do what you always have. You saved me that way. It will be all right. I promise we will step in and stop you when you go too far,” Canna says encouragingly when I hesitate.

That’s right. I’ll surely regret abandoning this boy here. Besides, I’m not trying to save him because I want to do something good or because I want him to like me. I don’t care what he thinks of me. This is simply me being selfish. I’m acting on my desire to have him. I just don’t want to regret this moment. I’ve made up my mind.

“You’ve left me no choice, since you refuse to let me meet your sister, boy!” I say, snatching the branch from Julius.

I swiftly draw a magic circle in the dirt with it. It’s for the Mist spell. Being surrounded by an abundance of magic particles has packed me full of magic, and this spell falls under wide-area magic, my specialty!

I pull a small bottle of green liquid from my pocket and open the lid.

This healing elixir I brought from Analia is a special potion I received from the DemiOracle to commemorate my ascension to office as one of the Four Grand Magi. It's a miracle potion capable of curing most conditions, including cuts, stabs, burns, back pain, plagues, malnutrition, and so on.

I'll never get my hands on another bottle now that I've cut ties with Analia, but I'll use it anyway.

I dump the elixir on top of the circle and chant the incantation. "Ilik ilik ein ik... Water Gate. Answer my request with this blood offering. My wisdom is absolute law!"

Watery green mist springs forth from the magic circle.

"You intend to spread the DemiOracle's elixir by diffusing it in the mist? That will only weaken its effects."

I can hear Julius's skeptical voice, but I pay it no attention as I slit my wrist with my nail and splash blood all over the magic circle.

"Don't worry, Julius. I just have to increase the magic effect of the elixir. Doing so will give the healing effects to anyone who breathes in this pea-green mist!"

I've gotta make it spread even further and wider through the village. If I succeed, the healing mist will eventually reach the boy's sister and cure her illness without me meeting her. It's not enough yet. More. More.

"Increase its effects? That shouldn't be...possible. How are you going—"

"I'm gonna increase its output with magic, obviously!" I supply for Julius's benefit, concentrating on the magic within me. "Amplify, amplify, amplify! More! More!"

The watery pea-green healing mist generated by the magic circle spreads in tandem with my voice.

"Using magic to amplify the effects of magic? Improbable. That defies all logic..." Julius sounds stunned.

What's so difficult for him to understand? All I'm doing is pouring a waterfall's worth of my magic into the spell to increase the output. What's strange about that?

Julius's denial of what I'm doing is a tad concerning, but I've gotta concentrate on my spell right now.

The more I wish it and the more I send magic into the circle, the more the green fog spreads until it covers the entire village.

Chapter 5: Welcome to Elle Village!

“**WITHOUT** much ado, meet our new villagers!” I announce, waving my hands over the dozen or so people I abducted from the desolated village.

The servants I brought from Analia stare at us in shock. Not that I blame them for being surprised to discover that their mayor came back from a shopping trip for sugar and salt with thirteen strangers instead.

Meanwhile, the kidnappees don't know how to react to my announcement that they're now a part of my village. And by the way, I went through a world of trouble to kidnap them.

Things were working out great and all when the healing mist cured the injured, sick, and emaciated people who breathed it, but everything went south when the villagers zoned out thinking the sudden change in their health was just a dream. Amid the confusion, Canna and Jasper helped persuade them to come to Elle Village.

Even the branch-wielding boy who saw what I did was very hesitant at first after seeing his sister regain her health. But he was quick to pick up on who was responsible for it, thanked me, and assisted in convincing the other villagers. Apparently, the villagers put a lot of trust in him, because the majority didn't resist once he spoke to them. He's amazing for his age.

As for the boy, his eyes dart around the fields growing throughout the village. The seeds and seedlings have grown quite large since we planted them. The desolated village's fields were more barren dust bowls than productive farmland, so he's probably in shock seeing how lush and healthy the neatly arranged crops in our village look.

We ended up dedicating more land to fields than expected, which is likely going to come back to bite us during harvesting season with our lack of farmhands. Maybe it was the correct choice to bring in more people after all.

Our new residents are going to live in the open houses left over from Julius's

initial building project. Now it's starting to feel like a pretty decent-sized village with about thirty residents. Still on the small side, but good enough. Women, children, and the elderly make up the majority of our newcomers. Or rather, that defines them all. Most of the able-bodied men left to become bandits, like the boy said.

Elle Village warmly welcomes our newcomers after I introduce them.

Meide whips up a soup that's easy to ingest for our starving new villagers, and we sit down to eat together. The healing elixir may have relieved the long-term effects of malnutrition, but they will still get hungry. Not to mention, Meide's cooking tastes the best in the whole wide world. I spot them cracking the occasional smile and starting to enjoy themselves as they eat their first solid meal in a long time.

What a relief. Everyone feels welcomed. Things should work out.

Reassured by what I see, I look around and notice Julius looming like an awkwardly placed statue a slight distance from where everyone else is eating. He's been acting kinda funny, brooding ever since I cast my spell on that village. He hasn't spoken a word and his face is grim.

I don't like it...

"Lady Elle, is it all right if I give the new villagers clothes? I would also like to have them bathe," someone says as I'm watching Julius, drawing my attention away from him.

Marie, the former laundress at my manor, is standing there with a big, friendly smile, holding the hand of one of the new children. The kid has a dorky smile after enjoying hot, tasty soup, but his clothes are full of holes and mud is smeared on his face and hair. The rest of the kids are just as filthy.

"Of course you can. Take them to the river first. I'll bring some clothes by later."

With my permission, Marie leads our new residents to the river.

I collect a bunch of garments and head to the riverside.



“MARIE! I’ve brought clothing!” I call out, gesturing to the towels and clothes piled on top of the magic carpet floating next to me.

Marie thanks me and tells the girls and women washing up in the river that clean clothes have arrived.

The women show hesitant diffidence, as if they’re still nervous around me. But the children, having already adapted to the change, race over to the carpet and cheerfully clamor over who gets what outfit.

Hehe, that’s little girls for you.

Speaking of little girls, I don’t see a single boy?

“Hey, Marie, what happened to the boys?”

“I told them to wash up further down the river.”

“You did?! That’s dangerous! Aren’t there only young boys?! Is anyone older with them?”

I didn’t see a single adult male in that entire village. Each of the boys looked younger than ten, with the oldest-looking one being the boy poking the ground with a stick. The water current may be idyllic in this part of the river, but it’s game over if a little kid slips and drowns.

“Laurent said he would look after them,” Marie explains.

“Who’s Laurent?”

“The village chief you brought back with you, Lady Elle. He’s the man you call ‘boy.’”

“Then he’s still just a child! That kid was the village chief? Either way, I’d hate for anyone to slip and drown. I’ll bring their clothes and check on them in the process.”

“B-But Laurent is—”

Marie tries to stop me for whatever reason, but I don’t want to risk anything happening to them while I hear her out, so I hurry downriver.



I can hear the kids’ playful voices as they splash around in the water

downstream. From this distance I can see fully naked children throwing handfuls of water at each other. The boy is having fun with them, too.

Oh, he has a pretty nice face without all the dirt and grime. Actually, I kinda remember that face from somewhere... Gives me a weird sense of déjà vu.

Meh. I'll let him know I brought clothes for now and watch over them until they're done playing.

"Boy! I've brought clothes and towels to dry off with!" I call out.

The boy looks over his shoulder and cries "Hey! Why?!" when our eyes meet. He quickly crouches down until his shoulders are under the water.

Oh my, what's wrong with him? Is there some strange critter wandering around? I sweep my eyes over the area, but there's nothing of note here.

"What's wrong, boy?"

"You don't know?! I'm...naked...! Don't ya stare at me! I mean, please do not look," he pleads, switching from casual to formal speech with cheeks redder than a tomato.

Oh, I get it now. He's embarrassed to be seen naked. Just like a grown-up! How silly. He's still just a kid who hasn't even hit the double digits yet.

"Don't be shy. It means nothing to me if I see a child's body. When do you turn ten, boy?"

He's tinier and more slender than my petite size, and my character was a legit *loli* in the manga. Actually, he's too skinny to be healthy!

"E-Excuse me, Lady Elle, you should know that he is..." Marie shows up behind me fumbling over her words.

"I'm...years old," I hear a low voice growl.

It's the boy who spoke. Failing to catch what he said, I look at him and cock my head. "Come again?"

"I told you...I'm sixteen!" he shouts.

HUH?!

"Wha? No way. Sixteen?!"

“Yeah... Yes, ma’am,” the boy sullenly affirms, covering his chest with his arms.

I’m in shock.

“It’s not unusual for this to happen to children in Gaea with food shortages becoming the norm these days,” Marie explains hesitantly. “They just stop growing. But once they get proper food in them, they will grow up strong and looking like their actual age. Even Canna, who is two years older than you, Lady Elle, looked like a small child in comparison at first. Don’t you remember?”

“Did she?”

Now that she mentions it, Canna was pretty tiny when I kidnapped her... Since when did she grow up to look like an adult? Her chest has gotten way bigger than mine, and her body is looking more feminine by the day...

Uh, if that’s the case, then I just checked out the naked body of a teenage boy my age? For that matter, isn’t this the first time I’ve ever seen a naked man in the flesh?

Studying anatomical models and drawings of the human body was a part of the Demon Lord Institute’s education, so I know how they look and work. But I think this is my first time seeing the real thing...

Just thinking about it is making me embarrassed. The small, obscured glimpse I caught of the boy’s— Stop right there, Elle! You mustn’t finish that picture!

“Um...uh, it’s okay!” I blurt to stop my thoughts from going down the gutter. “I got used to seeing pictures of the naked human body during my anatomy studies! A-All that’s different is the dangly bits, right?! No biggie! Don’t give it a second thought! B-Bu-But...I’ll take my leave for the day! Take care of the kiddos for me! Marie, you’re coming, too!” I rattle off and flee from the riverside.

My feet swiftly carry me deeper into the forest.

They don’t need a babysitter with a sixteen-year-old around. He’s the same age as me, making me even more unneeded. Staying there would make me nothing more than a Peeping Tom...

Oh my gosh! My face feels like it's burning up. H-How do I cool off? I-It's not my fault I saw just a tiny, wee glimpse of *it*...

So that boy is the same age as me. Sixteen is a bona fide adult in Gaea, making him the only adult male and the village's chief, I guess. Checks out in my books. And his name is Laurent.

...Laurent? Where have I heard that before?

"Ah!"

A foreboding feeling stops me in my tracks.

Those looks, and the name Laurent! Could he be the genius sorcerer and legit *shota* Laurent?!

I finally understand where the déjà vu is coming from. That boy is a member of Saint Aela's party in the manga!

If my past memory serves me right, Laurent's village is overrun with an unrelenting plague, causing him to leave for the big city in search of a cure, which leads him to Saint Aela. Seen as a dangerous plague-bearer, he's chased down and nearly killed by the city people when Saint Aela saves him.

They have a touching scene, and then she heads to his village to cure the plague with her holy powers, but the villagers have already died by the time they arrive. Embittered with deep sorrow and regret, Laurent is saved by her tender words and becomes her devoted follower afterward.

In the process, he awakens to his hidden magical talent...

Laurent is a formidable sorcerer within the manga. Aela has a palm-sized fairy named Lylish who teaches her how to use her saintly powers and happens to teach Laurent about magic on the side. This makes for a super-shocking section later on where readers are treated to a scene of him showing off an insane talent for magic.

In fact, in the manga, there were many enemies in the Demon Lord's Army that could only be defeated because he was there. Yes, for example, Elle of the Four Grand Magi... The saint's power alone couldn't have overcome Elle. She's defeated only after being tossed around by Laurent's magic.

That boy is the genius sorcerer Laurent capable of striking me down someday. To think such a prime prize has fallen right into my hands...

Whoa! Bad villainess. Don't go there. I accidentally started thinking like an evil general in the Demon Lord's Army!

I'm not plotting anything sinister, nor do I plan to become like manga Elle, but with the main cast of characters from the manga world gathering around me like this, I can't disregard that Saint Aela must be out there somewhere, too.

I'm seriously scared. Will I end up being defeated by Saint Aela just like in the manga? I don't want that. I wanna continue living my way with everyone in Elle Village.

Worst of all, it's getting close to that time. Close to when a mere village girl named Aela is called to the capital as a saint and sets out on a journey to save a ravaged Gaea. No, her journey could've started by now.

She might already be nearby...

"Elle, is this where you've been? I was looking for you."

"Gyah!" A high-pitched squeak is scared right out of me. I whip my head to the side to find Julius. "Wh-Wh-Wha? Julius?!"

"What's wrong? You're overly jittery."

I have every right to be! I was just scaring myself about Saint Aela sneaking up on me! Ugh, my heart leaped out of my chest and I'm gasping for air because he had to ambush me like that.

Julius gives my reaction a puzzled look and cuts straight to the point. "I need to talk. Do you have a minute?"

I manage to get my rampaging heartbeat and shortness of breath under control and take a good look at his face.

Huh, what's up with him? He's awfully serious. That reminds me—he's had this pensive expression ever since I used magic on Laurent's village.

"I have time... What's up?"

"Elle, what kind of trick did you use with that spell you cast on the village?"

“No trick. I just directed my magic into the magic circle to create mist—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” he interrupts, then clarifies, “You amplified and expanded the magic healing properties the DemiOracle imbued in that liquid. Since when have you been capable of doing that?”

“Since when? I never paid attention. I’ve been able to do it as long as I’ve tried?” I shrug. “Can’t you do the same thing, Julius? Like when you increase water capacity with Water Magic. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“It’s completely different. In that example, magic is used to increase the volume of matter. The more you increase the water and manipulate it, the more magic is consumed. You, however, did something very different. In your case, you used just a small portion of your own magic to massively multiply the amount of available magic—and it was someone else’s magic you were amplifying. There’s no other explanation for it. You increased the healing magic the DemiOracle stored in that liquid.”

Huh? I don’t get it.

“Sorry, what? Isn’t that normal?”

“Like hell it’s normal!” Julius shouts.

Wow, he’s on edge!

“Wh-Why are you mad? You don’t have to raise your voice at me!” I huff, shocked by his outburst.

Surprised, he presses a hand to his mouth. “Sorry. You are just too unassuming, Elle... I’m in the wrong. I still haven’t organized my thoughts yet. What is the best move...?” he says, acting unusually flustered. He inhales and exhales several times before looking at me again. There’s an ashen quality to his complexion.

“Ultimately, what I am trying to say in the simplest language possible is that you have the potential to become a perpetual magic generator.”

“A perpetual magic generator?” I echo.

“Yes. Elle, have you ever felt like you have run out of magic after casting one of your favorite wide-area spells?”

“...Never. But isn’t that just because I have a larger supply of magic than other people?”

“I thought so, too. But that’s probably not it. In your case, it’s not a matter of having a huge amount of magic to pull from—it’s how fast your magic restores. A normal sorcerer condenses magic particles in the air and in food into their internal magic supply. The only way to replenish the body’s magic is to collect a large amount of particles over a few days and wait as it slowly converts into usable magic,” Julius explains, creating an hourglass in his hand with magic and flicking the glass as each bead of sand slowly spills to the bottom.

“Even my magic restores at the same rate as the average sorcerer. You, however, have an abnormal restoration speed, making you capable of endlessly increasing magic output with magic. No, *restoration* may be too weak of a word choice. You have the potential to continue multiplying magic as long as your body allows it without ever needing magic particles. Simply put, Elle, you will never run out of magic,” he finishes.

Never run out?

It’s true that I’ve never been able to measure my magical power. On orders from the DemiOracle, I’ve done a lot of experiments to determine how much magic I have, but none of them worked. I just thought I sucked so much at controlling my magic I couldn’t measure it correctly, but...I never imagined a hidden talent was behind it!

Should’ve expected that from the youngest Grand Magi and a prodigy sorceress like me!

My thoughts are interrupted by Julius’s heavy sigh.

“We may have been two of the Four Grand Magi, but we were nothing more than useful cogs put in motion to control Analia. But if your magic has the potential to become a perpetual generator...” Julius bites out. “Aaah, thinking about it in that light, did you struggle with more delicate spells because adjusting the constant flow of magic was too difficult? Damn it all! Why didn’t I realize sooner?!” He runs an agitated hand through his hair and sinks his teeth into his bottom lip.

I can see that he’s in a huge panic and filled with regret over something. What

can I do about it? I don't really understand what he's worked up about.

Even if what he said about my magic is true, why does that make him act like it's the end of the world? It's not that big of a deal. If anything, isn't it pretty awesome to have an unlimited supply of magic? What's so bad about it?

"J-Julius? Why are you so flustered? Is that a bad thing?" I ask gingerly. He looks at me with an ashen face drained of hope.

"...It could be world-endingly bad depending on several factors. One of which I want to confirm right now: Does the Demon Lord know about your condition?"

"You mean the magic circle? I never went out of my way to mention that I can do these things, but I didn't hide it, either. I'm honestly not sure if it knows or not... But now that I look back on it, I was pretty much made to do nothing but experiments on my magic capacity ever since joining the Centers for Magic Research."

"I see," Julius murmurs, his hard expression softening a tad. "We might just be able to get by as long as the Demon Lord hasn't found out, but...wisdom dictates we assume the worst," he says softly, walking closer to me.

Determination has replaced the panic gleaming in his eyes only seconds ago. Captivated by the resolved air about him, I don't move when he wraps his arms around my back.

"Huh?! Uh, hello? Julius...?!"

Julius just walked right up and hugged me! Why is he hugging me? Did I really zone out so bad to end up encapsulated in his strong arms?!

"Elle, refrain from doing anything else to draw attention to yourself. Please don't use powerful wide-area magic like you did today. We can't let the Demon Lord catch on about you."

"Wh-What's the big deal?! And would you lemme go already?!" I cry, shoving his chest with my hands. Being the strongest Grand Magi, he doesn't even flinch.

"I will protect you no matter what comes. I swear to never hand you over to the Demon Lord."

“What has gotten into you?!” I ask, lifting my head. Julius’s face is much closer to mine than expected.

Julius looks like he’s about to cry.

He rarely ever showed any emotion in Analia, earning him the nickname Prince of Glacial Beauty, and while he’s become more expressive since establishing Elle Village, he has always been more mature, calm, and levelheaded than me. That very same Julius is on the verge of tears.

I’m held hostage by those liquid pools of blue. I reach out my hands—

“Oh, hey, there’s someone over here!”

“GYAH!”

I shove Julius away. Is this a case of hysterical strength during an emergency? Julius falls back two steps this time even though he didn’t even blink with my last shove.

Wow, that was dangerously close. What in the world was I about to do?

I lift my eyes to look at Julius just as he turns in the direction of our visitor. I step to the right and look around him at the speaker.

Oh, it’s Laurent. And the village kids are trailing behind him. Seeing as their hair is wet, they must’ve come this way after finishing up in the river. Sounded like one of the younger boys spoke.

Surprise flashes across Laurent’s face when our eyes meet, with me in Julius’s shadow. “Ah, uh, umm, I see Lady Elle was with you. I’m sorry. I interrupted your alone time together...,” he bashfully stammers, cheeks flushed, and averts his gaze.

Oh my gosh! That reaction! Laurent has totally misunderstood what’s going on between us! He’s definitely got the wrong idea about me and Julius.

Seeing him act all embarrassed with rapidly reddening cheeks is making me flustered now.

Stop it! I-It’s not how it looks. Sure, we were gazing into each other’s eyes while hugging, and I was lifting my hands up to his cheeks...

Oh gosh, just thinking about it in that light makes my cheeks burn hot. *Stupid Julius, what are you doing to me?! Hugging me close and looking into my eyes in that way will make me...make me...*

Gah! Crud. I'm so embarrassed my thoughts are traveling down a dangerous path!

Anybody, not just Laurent, would get the wrong idea about us if they saw what we were doing!

Why did he hug me?! Especially when he's going to fall in love with the stupid saint someday!

"L-L-L-Laurent! Don't you get the wrong idea! J-Julius and I are nothing like that! What you just saw was that! You know, that! Julius was just acting funny!" I blurt out in a loud voice, earning a look of dissatisfaction from Julius.

"I wouldn't say I was acting funny...," he says. "However, I acknowledge I wasn't being calm. I apologize for offending your personal space... I'll go cool my head off. I have to strengthen the barriers I have up around the village anyway." He quickly takes his leave.

He's walking away so fast I can hear his feet cut through the wind. He won't even look back. I don't know how else to put it except that he got over it and out of here fast!

As for me, my face is still on fire, and my heart is doing a little jig. It's not fair!

I'm sending all my irritation into a pointed glare directed at his back when I hear Laurent's reserved "Excuse me, Lady Elle...?"

"What?" I ask without looking at him. My eyes are too busy sending hate beams in the direction Julius left. I have every right to! I mean, what's his deal suddenly holding me in his arms, then leaving with the wind without an explanation?!

"Um, are you and Lord Julius lovers?"

"Didn't you hear me say not to get the wrong idea?!" I spin on Laurent and glower at him for asking such a thing. Yet the kid cracks a happy smile.

"You...aren't? ...I'm glad."

What is there to be glad about?! Sheesh.

“ANYWAY! Let’s head back to Elle Village, since you’re done with your bath! Back to our loving community!” I trumpet while struggling with an annoyance I just can’t put my finger on. I march back to the village with Laurent and the boys.

Interlude: The Daily Life of the Current Fourth-Ranked Analian Grand Magi, Clark

SEVERAL months have flown by since First-Ranked Grand Magi Julius and Fourth-Ranked Grand Magi Elle vanished from Analia. I was originally a researcher at the Centers for Magic Research run by the fourth-ranked Grand Magi, but the Demon Lord appointed me to fill the vacant position.

I knew I had slightly more skill than others, but I never expected to be selected as one of the Four Grand Magi. But it looks like I'm one now, so I've come to the former fourth's lab to take over her research...and I can't make heads or tails of it.

"What in the magic world was former fourth-ranked Grand Magi Elle researching?" I mutter, staring at the magic circle for wide-area spells drawn on the floor. I push up the glasses sliding down my nose.

Elle's research is a complete enigma. "I haven't seen such overly complicated configurations since my time repairing the circle in the Demon Lord's inner sanctum at the behest of the DemiOracle..." I crouch and run my fingers over the slightly deformed magic circle I assume she drew. The not-so-pretty lines look like an Explosion spell. But the way it's configured would drain too much magic from the caster.

If I had to guess, I'd say this spell is used to gauge how much magic the caster has. That would explain why it's such a magic guzzler, but wouldn't that point to Elle's research being into her own magic supply?

"Lord Clark, the other two Grand Magi have summoned you to the council room," says Alex, the man serving as my secretary of sorts. I've become one of the Grand Magi, so he's kind of like my subordinate.

"Oh, we have a meeting today? Whoops, I forgot... Not like the meetings mean anything. Do I have to go?"

"The second-and third-ranked Grand Magi are asking you to come."

Expressionless Alex is giving off an aura that nags, “Quit whining and get going.”

Well, darn. Looks like attendance is required after all.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture. I’ll go. I will.”

What a pain. I have a strong feeling that analyzing what Elle was researching here will be far more beneficial than attending fruitless meetings.

A job’s a job. I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose and head to the council room.



“YOU’RE late, newbie!”

Sereniel the Temptress, second-ranked Grand Magi, greets me with a frustrated groan, folding her arms over her ample chest, which is barely covered by a chilly-seeming outfit that looks like nothing more than an armored lingerie set. I never know where to look when it comes to her attire. Her breasts are practically falling out of the cups. Is magic holding them up?

“Ah, sorry ’bout that. Busy with a buncha stuff.”

“I’m busier than you!” she snips. “Julius is gone, there’s no first-rank replacement, and I’m stuck commanding the army on my own, y’know?!” She stomps over to me, angrily flipping her long, wavy flaxen hair over her shoulders.

The first-ranked Grand Magi is normally responsible for the Demon Lord’s Army, with the second serving as assistant. But with the first missing, Sereniel is commanding the whole army alone.

Sucks for her, but it’s not my problem.

“I see. You have it rough.” I parry her irate ranting with unfeeling sympathy. Her brows snap together and she whips her head away.

Maybe it’s just me, but Sereniel seems to be on a short fuse these days. She used to be a mature older woman—er, woman in the prime of her life—with the bewitching allure of always being in control. Did she suffer that big of a blow with Julius and Elle’s disappearance? Rumors always pinned her as having her eyes on Julius.

“Clark, my boy, how fare ye? Have a handle on wee Elle’s whereabouts?” a man with short white hair asks, his face drooping with exhaustion.

He’s Steel Regulus, one of the rare few Analian men to have more muscle than brain. As the third-ranked Grand Magi, he’s in charge of national security.

“Aha, sorry. I have Detect constantly running a search, but I haven’t caught the slightest trace of them. Chances are high that a more skilled sorcerer than me has an ingenious spell blocking any detection.”

“I see. No use, eh? Even the hope of the Centers for Magic Research is stumped, eh? My boys have been bellyaching about not finding her, either... Oh, I know! Julius is the man for the job! Let’s ask him to find her! He’s a surefire candidate to sniff her out!” Regulus exclaims with optimistic glee, earning a cutting glare from Sereniel.

“HOW! MANY! TIMES! MUST! I REPEAT MYSELF! We’re out searching because Julius is missing, too!”

“Ah, is he? Aaah, it’s too inconvenient without Julius around. The boy could do anything,” Regulus bemoans, taking an emotional swig of tea.

Regulus...that was my tea you just drank, you old coot. Oh well.

Regulus’s default mode is senility unless it’s an emergency or combat is afoot. I’m kinda worried about this country when its generals are made up of a crotchety middle-aged woman, an old man teetering on senescence, and someone who’s utterly useless outside of research like me.

Well, the country won’t fall apart as long as we have the Demon Lord.

“Oh my Demon Lord! I hate this! The Demon Lord isn’t helping, either! I can’t begin to understand what he’s thinking!” Sereniel complains.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. He’d been the picture of a nice old man until she said that. Now his relaxed face has hardened, his green eyes narrowing in on her.

“Sereniel. Your word choice is disrespectful. We must never suppose we can understand the Demon Lord’s boundless wisdom,” he says, completely changing his tone and manner of speech.

Sereniel frowns like she didn't expect he'd be upset.

"B-But aren't our orders strange?! Two of the Grand Magi disappeared at the same time, so why is the order only to find one of them?!"

"...It is not our place to question orders. We merely move as the Demon Lord commands," Regulus finishes, folding his arms and closing his eyes.

Indeed, the Demon Lord's orders in regards to the disappearance of the two Grand Magi pertain only to capturing Elle. There's no order to find or apprehend Julius. Julius is said to be the most skilled sorcerer in Analia's history, and he's the man everyone accepted as the kingdom's commanding officer.

It's extremely likely that my Detect spell and Regulus's subordinates' search attempts are coming up short because Julius is hiding their location with powerful magic. In short, three of the Grand Magi can do nothing before his mastery of magic. So there's definitely something suspicious about the Demon Lord ignoring his loss to focus obsessively on Elle.

One order in particular is questionable...

"Are you really okay with that, Regulus?! Those orders...are outrageous! Why is it just Elle?! And what the Demon Lord is really after is...!" Sereniel didn't finish that statement. Maybe she didn't want to say the rest.

So I happily fill in the blanks for her.

"The Demon Lord is only after Elle. Dead or alive. However, her heart must be brought back unharmed," I finish with clerical disinterest. Sereniel shoots me a loathsome look. I shrug and let her piercing gaze slide right off me.

All I did was say what she couldn't. It's so cruel of her to glare at me for that.

Regulus exhales a heavy sigh with his eyes shut. "We are the Demon Lord's hands, feet, eyes, and ears. But we can never know his heart. That belongs to him alone. We must never speak out against the Demon Lord's plans."

Sereniel gnaws on her bottom lip to stop from voicing her opinion and stalks out of the meeting.

Hah. This has become yet another meeting without any results. At least this means the meeting is over. I push up my glasses and move to leave the room

when I catch Regulus staring at me.

“Wh-What is it? I can leave now, right? Sereniel already left.”

The power behind his stare holds me hostage. I can't pry my eyes away.

Regulus may be ranked third now, but he has a history of serving as the first in his heyday. He has a certain powerful aura like no one else.

I stay perfectly still, awaiting what he has to say. He cocks his head.

“Where's my lunch?”

.....

“...Regulus, I believe it is almost three o'clock. You likely already had your lunch,” I respond.

“Is it?” he says and slowly ambles past me out of the council room.

.....

What can I do? I'm becoming extremely worried about the future of Analia.

Act 3: Threats to Elle Village

Chapter 6: The Seigneur's Messenger

A busy yet peaceful six months have passed since I brought Laurent and the others home with me. Every day has been filled with harvesting the thriving crops, selling the excess to other towns, preserving foods, and figuring out what to plant next. Much has changed, but the most mind-boggling is—

“Lady Elle, please look at this! I was able to harvest such a big daikon radish! See how fresh and succulent it looks?” a teen a whole fist taller than me calls to my attention.

The boy with the baseball bat-sized daikon has sun-kissed skin, shoulder-length burnt-chocolate hair, yellowish-brown eyes, and an endearing smile.

This teenager, who's a little on the small side but significantly bigger than when I found him, is Laurent.

In these past few months, he shot right up like the seedlings we planted, as Marie said he would. He was so much smaller than me at first, too!

Weren't you supposed to be the manga's legit shota?! Aren't you supposed to counterbalance me being a legit loli?! I thought we were going to look smaller than our ages together!

What kinda mechanics are at play here? Magic?! Is magic at fault?! Does becoming a genius sorcerer equate changing your height and appearance however you please?! I want that cheat! Bah!

Lately, Laurent has been getting on my nerves because he outgrew me. Hoping he won't catch on to my inner peevishness, I school my features and face him.

“I see. Looks like a tasty...radish.”

“It sure does! It's an amazing find! Oh? What are you making right now?”

“...Furniture and stuff.”

“I’ll help you! You’re making it with magic, right? Leave everything to me, Lady Elle!” he exclaims and starts drawing a magic circle in the dirt. His lines are prettier and more accurate than mine.

Yes, Laurent can already use magic. I haven’t taught him how. I haven’t taught him a single thing. Not this teenager with the hidden talent capable of killing me. I swore to take his potential to become the genius sorcerer Laurent to the grave with me in order to stay alive.

But the annoying brat learned magic on his own. The shock I felt when I found out is still fresh in my mind.

At the time, I was making more farming tools for our new residents while Laurent attentively watched. “I think I can do that, too,” he said afterward and attempted to pull off the spell by imitating what he saw me do.

I should’ve stopped him then and there, but I underestimated him, thinking even a genius sorcerer couldn’t pull off a spell just by watching without any training...only for him to succeed in every aspect.

I was so overcome with shock I thought my jaw might fall off with how far it dropped.

In Analia, I was the youngest Grand Magi ever and often called things like “Prodigy! The epitome of godly talent! The kind of magic savant who only comes around once every hundred years!” But even with all that talent, I don’t have the ability to re-create a spell after seeing it only once.

Even Julius was surprised.

Magic is the brainchild of knowledge and skill—it shouldn’t be usable without basic knowledge of how it works! What in the world is the deal with Laurent’s body?!

Despicable. I despise Laurent’s talent!

“Lady Elle? Is something wrong? Magic particles are seeping out of you,” Laurent points out with an innocent grin.

Magic particles were born out of my jealousy of you! Annoying genius!

For that matter, I never knew Laurent had a cheat ability to see magic particles, and I reread the manga hundreds of times! You heard that right. Laurent can apparently see the normally invisible magic particles as a black aura. He developed the nifty trick of reproducing someone else's spell by sight alone through watching how that black aura fluctuates.

Copycat sorcerer!

"Listen here, Laurent! You must never think you are a better sorcerer just because you have a slightly better knack for magic than me! I'll never forgive you if you think I'm weak and try to take me out, attempt to take my life, and bury me! Burn it into your head that I'll roast you, toast you, ghost you, then post you!" I declare with authoritative pomp.

Fact is, Laurent and I have entirely different magic supply levels to work with. Granted, Julius said it comes down to more than just the amount of magic I have access to. But anyway, Laurent won't be able to fire any wide-area spells like me even if he wants to because he'll run out of magic.

Hmph! How do you like them apples?! Laurent is a jack of all trades but a master of none, after all.

"I know. You often tell me not to take you out or try to kill you, but why would I ever do something like that? You are my—my village's savior...and also...um...someone who is very...spe—"

I shoot Laurent a sharp look as he bashfully fidgets.

I mean, manga Laurent killed manga Elle! Granted, this Laurent won't try to kill me...or so I'd like to think. He's actually attached to me like a puppy to their owner.

Plus, his personality is different from the manga.

Manga Laurent was a character with a hint of darkness just below the surface. Maybe it had something to do with his entire village being wiped out in the manga. That said, I don't know when Laurent, with his hidden potential to outclass me as a sorcerer, will turn on me!

I'm a woman who never lets down her guard. That's me, Elle!

“That’s right. I’m your savior. And don’t you ever forget it! Never try to take me out! It’s a promise! You’ll have to swallow a thousand needles if you break it!” I emphasize for emphasis’s sake, when chills suddenly scrape down my spine.

Uh-oh, I know this feeling...

I nervously glance over my shoulder. There, the Prince of Glacial Beauty’s frigid gaze is drilling into me.

“Elle...did you not understand my warning?” Julius utters in an icy voice I swear brought down the air temperature.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha-What warning was that?!” I stutter and hide behind Laurent. Julius is scary.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I warned you to refrain from conspicuous activities.”

“N-No worries. I d-didn’t do anything overly conspicuous. I just snatched up a handful of villagers from a frontier villager! Nothing outta the ordinary!” I say, frantically trying to vindicate myself while behind Laurent’s back.

The ice only hardens in his glacial eyes.

Scary.

Julius has become a fussbudget ever since he brought up that puzzling theory about me being a magic generator or whatever. His anger goes through the roof whenever I impulsively kidnap unfortunate village people. It seems like he just wants me to stop being so obvious, but it bothers me to leave those folks like that...

And on that note, Elle Village has become a fabulous village with over a hundred residents!

“Laurent,” Julius says, turning his frosty glare on Laurent, “I told you not to take your eyes off Elle. And did I not also tell you to prevent her from drawing attention to herself?”

Dreadful freezing air waves spill off him.

“Er, I’m sorry, Master Julius. I was saved by Lady Elle’s kindness, so, umm, it’s

not easy for me to stop her from saving another...”

Aw, Laurent’s shoulders have drooped. He has entered into a sorcerer apprenticeship under Julius. They usually get along like brothers, but...

“Julius, don’t blame Laurent. He hasn’t done anything wrong. He’s just going along with my selfish requests,” I intervene. Julius’s already cold eyes narrow to slits.

Wh-What’s got him all upset?!

“...I don’t like you defending Laurent, either.”

“O-Oh hush. Laurent is innocent here,” I counter.

“Enough wasting time on what has already come to pass,” he says with a sigh, giving up on arguing the point. “But, Elle, if you keep this up for long...” Julius trails off as he lifts his head and scowls into the distance.

What’s wrong? A frown has taken over his handsome face.

“Someone has finally sniffed out this village.”

“What do you mean?” I look in the same direction. The sky is a beautiful blue, but slight vibrations are coursing through Julius’s barrier.

“It appears someone is heading straight here,” he curses.



AN armed group calling themselves the Messengers of Gaea has shown up at the entrance to Elle Village, where my original village confidants, Jasper and Canna, as well as Julius, Laurent, and I, are already waiting.

The group is made up of thirteen people: a portly middle-aged man dressed in flamboyant silks, ten men decked out in plate armor, and two people hidden under hooded robes.

I glare at them with eyes that say, “Ohoho, what business brings you to my village?” Too bad they don’t seem to care about the way I’m staring them down.

Of course they wouldn’t. Both Julius and I are hidden from the unwelcome messengers by Julius’s Hide spell.

With our exotic looks and attire, we run the risk of being immediately outed as non-Gaeans. Julius is incredibly sensitive about word getting out that Analian sorcerers are living in this village. That's supposedly the worst thing that could happen.

Hence why we are currently chilling on the sidelines as invisible people. The best part? The residents of Elle Village can see us just fine. I have absolutely no idea how Julius pulled that off. He really is capable of anything. He's starting to seem a lot like a certain blue cat robot from my past life's memories.

"My, my, my! This village is even more magnificent than I imagined. Ah, I'm Magnus Calmir-Fenlit, messenger for Lord Ayrscott, the seigneur presiding over this region. Can you fetch the village representative for us first, dollface?" the messenger asks Canna in a sickeningly beseeching voice.

This seigneur's messenger gives off totally creepy vibes. I mean, he's pretending to survey the village while his eyes chase after every cute village girl's behind. Perversion gleams in his beady eyes.

"If it's the representative you seek, that would be me," Jasper says, taking a step forward.

Neither Julius nor I can take up the mantle without trouble, so we appointed Jasper as acting mayor. After all, Jasper is from Gaea, has a thick beard, and comes across as a clean-shaven grandfather, so he definitely has the whole mayor vibe going for him.

"Ooh? *You're* the mayor? You're more average than I expected. You look nothing like a heinous villain who would kidnap people from the surrounding villages to make your own village without government permission," the messenger says with a sticky smirk.

How rude! Old man Jasper isn't a heinous villain! He's as charming of a gentleman as he looks! Besides, I'm the kidnapper, not Jasper!

I knew it. This messenger dude is the type of creeper I viscerally can't stand. I mean, he's taking every chance he gets to ogle the young ladies of Elle Village, lingering especially long looks on Canna's buttocks.

"This is the village rumored to increase its population by kidnapping people

from neighboring villages? It doesn't look the way the rumors made it out to be."

The smaller of the two hooded figures speaks out against the messenger's haughty accusations. Their hood obstructs their face from view, so I was surprised to hear the adorable, dulcet tones of a teenage girl.

"You mustn't be deceived by appearances," the messenger slurs. "The scale of the kidnappings and the method used all point to there being a *WICKED* sorcerer hidden in this village." He rakes his eyes over the villagers.

My MO gave me away?! Er, I can't deny I go all-out during kidnappings. B-But I'm not a wicked sorcerer! I'm a good one! After all, I make sure to get permission from people before I kidnap them!

I'm a little shaken up by how astute the messenger is contrary to his looks.

"Then again, I find it hard to believe a sorcerer is lingering in this dinky, third-rate village," the man says with a snicker. "Anyone who can use just a sprinkle of magic in this era is raised up as a hero by Gaea. Word has it they can have all the women and money they want. They would have to have a few screws loose to purposely live out in the boondocks. Speaking of which, there's even a cheeky little girl strutting around with the title of saint when she's commoner riffraff... What a sorry world we live in... Oh, master sorcerers, please don't be offended. Sorcerers who choose to serve under us of noble blood where you belong are quite splendid."

He slides his disgusting gaze to the two people hidden under hoods and heavy cloaks.

There's no way in magic hell that this creeper finds anything about sorcerers splendid. A prickly aura pours off the hooded figures.

No matter how I look at the pair, they give off a completely different feeling from the messenger and his henchmen.

If what the messenger said is anything to go by, they seem to fall into a mercenary bodyguard role. Sorcerer bodyguards. I definitely sense extraordinary power from them—magic.

Things could turn bad fast.

Julius hid our magic, but a talented sorcerer could possibly see through the spell. On the upside, the caster is Analia's strongest sorcerer, so the chances of us being outed are thin, but it's better to be on the cautious side.

"...A wicked sorcerer, you say? Nothing heinous has been done here as far as I can see. The villagers don't look like they are being held here against their will," says the taller hooded figure with a fit physique noticeable even under their heavy robe. The low voice reminds me of a bubbling brook and definitely sounds masculine.

Looks like the cloaked figures are a man and a woman.

"You *really* think so?" the messenger drawls. "Now, now. No need to pass judgment on the spot. We just need to have a little chat to tell if the sorcerer here is good or evil."

His gaze snaps to Jasper.

"There's no point in beating around the bush: I know a sorcerer is here. Ah, I wouldn't get any smart ideas. As you can see, I have two sorcerers with me as well. You know what to expect if your sorcerer...goes crazy, yes? Now then, Mr. Jasper, you seem to represent this village—are you the sorcerer? You don't look the part."

Everyone in Elle Village definitely picked up on this guy's nasty personality from his demeaning tone.

Julius turns to Laurent, who gets the signal and nods. He sweeps out of the throng and stands before the messenger. "I'm the sorcerer. But I'll have you know that I didn't kidnap the neighboring villagers without their consent."

Oooh, Laurent has picked up the torch. And he protected my honor! What a guy! You tell 'im, Laurent! I didn't kidnap without consent. I made sure to ask, "You don't mind, right?" before every abduction!

Surprise flickers across the messenger's round face. Then he lets out a deep, mocking laugh that reminds me of a strained foghorn.

"What? A child like *you*? Hahaa. I see, I see. Seems like this village has naughty adults taking advantage of naïve little children. Gee, I need to take a page out of your book," he says, giving Jasper a loaded look.

He probably figures Jasper tricked Laurent into becoming this small village's sorcerer.

He's totally wrong, though! Laurent became a sorcerer against my wishes! Of his own making! My beloved Elle Village doesn't have a single naughty adult in it.

And anyways, hasn't this guy been overly rude, from his word choice down to his almighty attitude?! He pisses me off! Also, he'd better quit cruising Canna's figure with those pervy eyes!

"I'm not a child!" Laurent protests. Air rushes around him in a powerful gale. This magical wind pressure is different from naturally occurring gusts of wind.

I didn't feel the clean flow of magic that comes from a magic circle or from forming the spell with hand signs, so it seems like his magic is running a little wild in response to his emotions. Laurent is a genius, but he's a bit of a double-edged sword whenever he's treated like a child and becomes so upset he hurts everyone around him.

But the sudden burst of wind magic seems to have scared the messenger. He lets out a small yelp and hides behind the hooded pair.

Seeing the cheeky man trembling in his boots, I fist-pump the air with a "You tell 'im!"

Good job, Laurent! Your sensitive heart seems to have done a wonderful job of scaring that loathsome man! Ratface shouldn't be provoking a sorcerer if he's that scared of them. Foolish Gaeon messenger!

"Stop that. Magic isn't meant to be used for such negative sorcery," instructs the taller of the two cloaked figures while I'm secretly cheering Laurent on.

There's a dignified weight to the voice that lends it an authoritative edge, like someone used to ordering people around. Who is he? The messenger made it sound like they're hired sorcerers...

Laurent quiets his magic with a frown. The whooshing winds cease.

"I just turned seventeen. I'm an adult," Laurent insists for good measure.

Isn't he a little too hung up on that? Then again, he is in the height of

adolescence and particularly touchy about those things, so the rest of us have to be more sensitive around him.

“Bah! Shut up! Insolent heathen, you dare threaten me, His Lordship’s confidant, with magic?! Take him down! Now!”

Meanwhile, the messenger has cast his grimy act to the wind and is throwing a fit. He’s bellyaching and pointing at Laurent from behind the two cloaked figures.

The sorcerers share a look.

“He didn’t harm you in any way,” the woman contends in an exasperated voice. “Young sorcerers often struggle from their magic running amok with their volatile emotions. Furthermore, weren’t your intentions to speak with the village mayor first?”

“There’s nothing to talk about! There’s a dangerous sorcerer right there!” he asserts. His face erupts into a volcanic red upon seeing the lack of action taken by his magic bodyguards. “Useless magic users! You dare forget the debt you owe me for hiring you filthy, wandering sorcerers!”

The cloaked figures don’t take the seething, cursing messenger’s bait; they merely look down at him in silence.

“Pieces of shit! I’m done with you! I won’t ask again!” he bellows, angrily turning to the row of armored men. He closes his mouth before he barks whatever orders were on the tip of his tongue.

Wondering what stopped him, I follow his gaze to Canna. His eyes narrow with some nefarious plan and perversion warps his expression. He clears his throat and slowly turns back toward Jasper.

“Ahem, I spoke a tad out of line there. My bad, my bad. Speaking with you will give me a better idea of what kind of...village this is. Leave the judgment to me, the messenger trusted by His Lordship,” the man avers, suddenly returning to that nauseating smarmy voice. “Mr. Jasper, you are undoubtedly the village head here, correct?”

The way he did a complete one-eighty is extremely disturbing. Even Jasper warily replies, “I am. What of it?”

“In that case, let’s discuss the future of this village without these pesky sorcerers. Either way, if you have decided to build a village in this territory, you will have to pay taxes. You haven’t paid anything up until now, so we have to decide on that amount as well,” the messenger claims with his trademark smug grin.

Taxes are understandable. Jasper told me that you have to pay a land tax in the form of crops and money if you want to live in Gaea. Failing to pay will lead to powerful people such seigneurs coming to destroy the village. Going along with Gaeian law is the best way to secure Elle Village’s stability.

But I don’t wanna pay anything when the person demanding payment is this despicable. Not to mention his volatile emotions don’t bode well for a fair deal...

I cautiously watch over the proceedings as the messenger faces the two cloaked figure again.

“You proved traveling sorcerers are utterly worthless, so you don’t have to come with me. Cheeky magic users can keep watch here. Oh, and if you dare disobey me again, I will tell His Lordship to punish you severely. Tread carefully.” He looks at them with disgust.

The tall sorcerer shrugs and gives a curt “Got it.”

Frowning, Jasper glances at Julius. With a nod from him, Jasper formally faces the messenger. “Very well. Please come to my mansion first, then. I will listen to what you have to say there.”



AFTER settling the quarrel in front of the village, the discussions move to Julius’s mansion, where the messenger sits across from Jasper with his armed men standing behind him. They aren’t getting off to a great start with Ratface leering after Canna’s butt as she prepares a pot of tea.

He makes me sick. Every instinct in my body screams that this guy is a pig!

The revolting messenger reluctantly stops checking out Canna’s behind to look at Jasper.

“You can’t just make a village without telling anyone. You must first go through His Lordship for permission. Furthermore, even our magnanimous lord will be angered if you obtain your villagers by kidnapping them from his other villages,” he says, trying to exert influence over the talks as he slurps the tea Canna prepared.

“Your grievances are valid as far as founding a village in this land without following proper procedure is concerned. However, we have not kidnapped people,” Jasper corrects him. “Villagers without properly functioning villages came here when we invited them.”

“Invited them, eh? Such a pretty young lady accepted your invitation? I wish I had your remarkable skills of persuasion,” the messenger drawls, leering after Canna with a lecherous smirk.

He’s absolutely disgusting! He’s a walking, talking embodiment of perversion!

Canna’s uncomfortable and frowning. Borrowing a word from my past life, this is grounds for a sexual harassment suit! He’s a skirt-chasing, sexual-harassing, perverted man in power!

Someone grabs my shoulder before I can take another step forward to bash in that sexual offender’s shiny, bald pate. I whip my head around to find Julius there. He’s grimly shaking his head, begging me not to.

I argue back with my eyes that we mustn’t let this monster go unpunished, but I lose to Julius’s powerful gaze...

I shift my attention back to Canna, who has turned her gaze my way as well. She smiles and shakes her head, telling me she’s all right.

The messenger and his lackeys can’t see us, but the residents of Elle Village can. Canna is trying to show me that she’s okay before I crispify Mr. Bald Ratface Messenger.

Stopped by both Julius and Canna, I purse my lips and overlook Baldy’s indiscretions this once. But the moment he tries anything funny, he’s done for!

“An important messenger such as yourself has much to do, I’m sure. Let’s cut straight to the chase. Didn’t you come here today to discuss how much our village is to pay in taxes?” Jasper asks, ending the small talk.

“Well, you aren’t wrong,” Baldy the Rat Messenger says arrogantly. “Why, the village I saw today is large and fruitful. Taking that into consideration, you need to pay this amount in crops...”

He scribbles down a number on a piece of paper he had on hand. Then he passes that quickly written note over to Jasper.

Jasper turns pale the second he looks at it. “Y-You want to take this much from us?! Impossible! We will starve to death!”

Seriously?! He wants that much?! Lemme take a look at that!

Julius and I circle behind Jasper and peek at the paper.

Just like Jasper said, he’s asking for a ridiculous amount. It doesn’t even take into account what will happen to the village if the weather turns sour and we have a bad harvest.

“Don’t be greedy. A village of this size won’t have any issue fulfilling this. Besides, this is the same land tax we charge all villages.” The foolish messenger laughs like a horse.

All of Gaea’s farming villages are dying because you bleed them dry with these nefarious taxes! Seething rage roils through me.

I knew it! My fist needs to break his nose! I take another step forward just for Julius to stop me again.

(Calm down, Elle.)

Julius’s voice echoes in my head. He’s using a type of telepathic magic that allows us to converse with our minds instead of our mouths.

Wow, I didn’t know Julius could use this class of magic. I always thought only Sereniel the Temptress was capable of this among the Four Grand Magi.

(Ooh! I hear your voice in my head! Is this your ability, Lord Julius?)

I hear Jasper speaking this time. Julius has his hands on both of our shoulders. Seems like that allows the three of us to converse mentally.

(Don’t stop me, Julius! I can’t allow him to get away with this tyranny! I’ll roast him, toast him, ghost him, then post him!)

(Don't. I don't want to draw attention over this. Jasper, you can accept these terms. We are at fault for establishing a village without following the rules. He has likely included our back taxes. I expected him to extort a more ridiculous number. I'm willing to turn a blind eye on this amount. We should be able to secure more food by increasing our farmland.)

(That's a valid point... All right, Lord Julius. I will go ahead and accept the messenger's terms now.)

Jasper sits up straight and returns his attention to the oblivious messenger. "Very well. It honestly won't be easy for us to meet your demands, but we will strive to set aside this amount," he concedes with a somber face.

"Oooh! You are quite the accomplished man!" the harebrained messenger rejoices with a pompous grin. "I like that you don't drag things out. Now with your land tax settled at that number, we can move on to the matter of your unpaid taxes..."

"You want to take more than you already have?!" Jasper cries out despite trying to maintain his calm throughout the discussions.

He's demanding more than that already outrageous amount?! I had totally assumed that the number included all our back taxes! Julius only gave the okay because he thought so, too. I look over at him to see his expression harden.

"Naturally. You were the ones who built a village this way, kidnapped people from other villages, and lived under the radar. Your village was fated to be razed to the ground if His Lordship wasn't magnanimous."

"We did not kidnap people against their wishes!"

"At any rate, you must have this amount of food ready for us by the end of next month."

Ratface ignores Jasper's outburst and thrusts another piece of paper at him. I peek at the content written there, which describes the amount of food Elle Village has to set aside from now on. No matter how you slice it, this isn't something we can prepare in the span of one month.

"Clearly you jest? This is extortion. The amount you're asking for is beyond anyone's means!" Jasper argues.

The sexual harasser feigns a worried pout. “Is that so...? Well, if you insist it is beyond your means, we can just burn down the entire village and call it a day. Are you all right with that option?”

Like hell anyone would be all right with that! I’m too stunned for words. Jasper shares the same sentiment—he springs to his feet and closes the gap with the messenger.

“Are you sane, man?! Your demands are entirely unreasonable! We can’t do what we can’t do...!”

“Well, when you put it like that...we can approach this from a different angle. Come now, relax in your chair, the answer to your problems is easy. Oh, and can you get me another cup of tea?” Creepy McCreepy requests of Canna, turning the most loathsome, lecherous grin on her yet.

Jasper loudly clears his throat, redirecting the messenger’s randy gaze back to him. “What other angle is there?” he asks.

“There’s always another angle, my good man,” he sneers. “Yes, indeedy. Why, it’s simple. All you have to do is give me all the women in the village, and I will use my authority to halve next month’s payment for you. The caliber of fine-looking women in this village outdoes many in this province.” He hums and squeezes Canna’s butt.

“Ah!” Canna cries out in surprise, and the grinning bastard sniggers with his perverted face on full display.

I snap. I won’t forgive the jerk! How dare he touch someone from my village! How dare he treat women like cattle!

Did he suddenly shift his stance on this village during his temper tantrum earlier because he came up with a plan to make Canna his plaything?! Perverted sicko!

I step forward to roast him and toast him, but Julius annoyingly stops me again.

(Why are you stopping me?!)

There’s this saying in my world that even the patience of a saint eventually

runs out. He's already tried my patience too far! Ah, but the Bible says you're supposed to forgive seventy times seven times.

.....

Well, I'm not a saint! I won't forgive him!

(Using magic will alert others that there's an Analian sorcerer in this village. Once word gets out, it will reach Analia.)

(So what?! What's so dangerous about that?!)

(Hunters will come if Analia discovers this place.)

(I'll protect everyone in this village from them!)

(It's not the village I'm worried about. You're the one in danger, Elle!)

I flay Julius with my angry glare for stopping me.

(You should know, I created Elle Village because I wanted the freedom I never had in Analia. I want to stay free and I want the people of Elle Village to have freedom, too. Shaking in my boots in fear of the Demon Lord circle and dreading Analia to the point I can't ever do anything is not the freedom I was seeking!) I convey to him in my mind, sharpening my gaze on him.

Julius hesitantly loosens his grip on my shoulder. Using his moment of wavering to my advantage, I shake free of his hand and reach out for the insolent messenger's shoulder to roast him.

"Wh-What?! Y-You lout! Let go! Lemme go! Ow! You're hurting me!" he starts moaning in front of me.

I definitely had my hand out to turn him into a nice rat-roast, but I haven't done anything yet.

One of the armored men from the security unit the sexual harasser brought with him is twisting his arm behind his back. A member of his own escort party is doing that when he should be standing back and awaiting commands. I run my eyes over the rest of the guards, and all but one are in shock.

The one calm guard among the panicking group folds his arms. "I'm disgusted. I didn't think my kingdom had rotted this far. I can only hope scum of your

caliber are infesting only this territory,” he states calmly.

My eyes instinctively take in his relaxed stance, so clearly different from the rest of the confused guards.

“Who the Demon Lord’s spawn are you?!” the messenger angrily demands, overwhelmed. “Ghh! That hurts!” he cries when the man gripping his arm gives it an extra twist.

“Silence, lowlife! Bow before your lord!” commands the man restraining the rat-faced messenger.

Then, with everyone watching, the man with a commanding air of calm slowly removes the large metal helmet hiding his face. Lustrous hazel hair spills out from under the rising helmet. Strong-willed almond-shaped eyes pierce the messenger.

Aaah, I’ve seen him before. He’s—

“You are in the presence of Gaea Kingdom’s third prince—Prince Guido Fance Grimond!”

I freeze in place, my arm still in the air. I can easily imagine the manga narration box showing up beneath the character, announcing his name and title as he flashes his royal crest.

Guido...the third prince...is here...which has to mean the girl under the cloak is...

The shock is so great my brain draws such a blank I think I’m gonna faint. Meanwhile, red suffuses Ratface’s complexion, and he glowers at the man introduced to the room as the third prince.

“Royalty?! Y-You expect me to believe that blatant lie?! His Highness the Prince would never be here! Guards! Capture this fool pretending to be of the royal family! Do it now!” he thunders, shaking the whole room with his squealing voice.

The confounded guards hesitantly draw their swords and turn them on Prince Guido in the wimpiest gesture yet. As for the prince, he meets them with an intrepid smile and knocks down the entire indecisive party with a single flick of

his sword.

Aaah. Yup. Knew that was coming. The prince's sword is a cheat weapon that can store magic. In just one swing, he manifests the power of twenty strong men.

I dissect the situation as armored men comically do backward somersaults. Confirming their true identity has had the oddly positive effect of calming me down.

The messenger gags on his words after witnessing this slender slip of a man wipe out his brawny guards in full plate armor with little more than a flick of his wrist.

Haha! Serves you right!

But I kinda wanted to save the day after I wore down Julius with my cool speech.

I quietly lower my right hand, which I'd raised to save Canna.

The door opens at the same time. A petite figure hidden under a cloak is standing in the doorway. And behind them is a slightly flustered Laurent.

Something flies out from under the figure's cloak. It's a small humanoid creature about the size of a human head with dainty, transparent wings, long pink hair, and large yellowish-green eyes. The legendary creature, called a fairy, hovers in the air and thrusts her finger in Guido's face.

"Hey, Prince Guido! You started without our signal! And we went through all that work to gather information from the villagers, too! Now that's all for nothing!" the fairy decries in a bubbly voice. She snorts and crosses her tiny arms.

I don't know what about that tirade was funny, but it gets the cloaked woman to softly laugh.

"Hehe. Lylish, it isn't nice to point at people."

A pretty dulcet voice fills the room. Even her "Hehehe" laughter sounds like beautiful chimes in the wind. How in the world does one become capable of laughing like that?

The reprimanded fairy goes “Hmph” and turns up her chin.

Guido lets out a delighted laugh. “Haha! My bad. I couldn’t stand watching this man a second longer. So, what did you hear from the villagers?” he asks, directing his loving gaze toward the cloaked woman.

“I was able to ask them a lot with Laurent’s assistance. The rumors about forced kidnappings appear to be false, as we assumed. Everyone said they willingly came to this village,” she answers, drawing back her hood and revealing beautiful long hair the color of night, healthy skin, slightly colored cheeks, rose-colored lips, and beautiful jet-black eyes framed by curled lashes.

I figured it was her. The real person is a hundred times more beautiful than her manga version. This is the girl I had been a die-hard fan of during my last life. I wanted to be just like her.

“A black-haired woman accompanied by a fairy... Don’t tell me you’re the village wench they call a saint?!” the messenger utters, shock causing his voice to tremble.

He’s a dense lout to only notice it now. I realized it the moment Prince Guido came on the scene! Ha! That’s right, she is—

“Oh dear, cat’s out of the bag already? Hello. I’m Aela. They call me a saint, but I’m just your standard sorcerer.”

Saint Aela. The heroine of my favorite manga series.

“Labeling your powers *standard* will make it difficult for anyone else to ever call themselves a sorcerer,” Guido says, walking over to Aela with a serene smile.

Third Prince Guido is a magic swordsman who fights by imbuing magic into his royal sword.

“Your Highness, Saint Aela, what would you have me do with this?” asks the armored knight restraining the messenger.

I’m betting this knight is Golem, the brilliant swordsman who was originally the captain of the prince’s guard.

“I leave the decision to His Highness,” Aela says with a sweet smile. The pink-

haired fairy Lylish perches on her shoulder.

And behind her is the genius sorcerer Laurent, who's still trying to figure out the situation.

"Take him away from here. I will hand down his punishment later," the prince orders after careful deliberation.

With only one ear keyed in on their conversation, my mind goes into full panic mode over having finally come face-to-face with a scenario where all five of the manga's main characters have gathered.

The magic swordsman Prince Guido.

The genius sorcerer Laurent.

The master warrior Golem.

The fairy Lylish.

And lastly, Saint Aela.

Every member of Saint Aela's party responsible for killing manga Elle have gathered in the same room in front of me.



(Elle, what's wrong? Are you all right?) Julius's voice echoes in my numb head.

I tear my eyes away from Saint Aela's party and glance up at his face. He's looking at me with concern.

(Julius...)

I wonder what he thought when he saw Aela. She's someone he was fond of in the manga world. I clearly remember the scene where he betrayed his country to join her.

What is this feeling? My heart aches...and is restlessly thumping.

(Something must be wrong. What is it?) he asks again, firmer in his tone.

I shake my head. *(Nothing's wrong. Just in shock over the sudden turn in events! So she's the saint, huh?)* I respond, trying my hardest to maintain a modicum of calm.

I think he can see through my feigned bravado. A suspicious frown weighs down his brow.

(Elle, please tell me if something is worrying you.)

(I'm not worried about anything in particular! Anyway, what do you think Saint Aela and co. are going to do next?) I redirect the conversation and my gaze to Saint Aela.

Julius is completely displeased with me for changing the topic, but he goes along with it.

(Let's wait and see. I will keep us invisible to them in the meantime. Don't do anything to break the spell. Speaking to or touching a person will make the magic's effects wear off on them.)

(I know. I won't,) I promise as I watch Saint Aela's group.

Golem tied up the rat-faced messenger and knocked-out guards and carted them off somewhere. He should've tossed them out on their fried butts after I roasted them, toasted them, ghosted them, then posted them!

My eyes suddenly lock with Aela's while I'm silently raging...or at least it seemed that way to me. But how could that happen? I shouldn't be visible to

her under Julius's spell.

(Impossible... How? It can't be.)

Julius's panicked voice races through my head at the same time Aela clearly looks at us and smiles.

"We have someone else with us here, yes? Who might you be?" Aela inquires in her delicate voice like silver bells.

What? N-No way! S-She knows we're here?!

I instinctively look to Julius; he's assessing Aela with a rare flustered look. And we aren't the only ones in a panic. Laurent, knowing we shouldn't be visible to them, glares at Aela.

"Wh-What kind of nonsense question is that? Th-There's nothing but empty space there," he insists.

But Guido, discounting Laurent's insistence, scowls in the same direction Aela is looking—in other words, at us.

"You see something, Aela?" he asks, rushing forward and thrusting his sword at us.

I nearly let out a small "Watch where you point that thing!"

Guido probably just swung his sword at random, but the tip came uncomfortably close to my face.

I take an instinctive step back, and Julius pulls me protectively behind him.

Don't go swinging around long, magical swords without warning, boy! You've been doing whatever the hell you please knocking around bad guys left and right, but this is indoors! You're inside a mansion belonging to Elle Village, not the battlegrounds!

I direct my mounting displeasure into a glare at Guido and catch sight of Laurent a few feet behind him. His whole face has turned blue upon seeing the sword tip thrust at my face.

Uh-oh. This is a bad sign. Laurent is seething with unspeakable rage.

"...Stop it! Don't point that at her! Wind Gate, release!" Laurent chants a spell

with trembling lips. His spell successfully summons forth a gust of wind that blasts Guido away.

Laurent is the impulsive type. I'm pretty sure he would've gotten just as angry if Guido pointed his sword at any of the villagers, too. I understand how he feels. I'd want to roast, toast, ghost, and post whoever dared to swing a sword at any of our villagers.

Laurent's magic wind slams Guido against the wall, but he immediately resumes a battle stance with his sword at the ready. He probably didn't take much damage because he's wearing Gaea's royal armor. That set has been enchanted with various magic stats. At least, if it runs by the same logic that I remember from the manga.

Guido sucks magic into his sword while I'm relying on my past life's knowledge to assess the situation.

"Why did you suddenly attack me? Were you actually a kidnapping mastermind after all?! Aela, get away from that boy!" Guido orders, staring Laurent down.

"You're wrong, Your Highness." Aela shakes her head. "Please calm down! You too, Laurent. I'm sorry. I brought this on us with my poor choice of words... They aren't bad people. I can tell!" she entreats, trying to persuade Guido to lower his sword. Then she directs the compassionate gaze of a saint toward me and Julius.

A heavy sigh beside me breaks the trance her smile has put me in.

"I never expected to meet someone who could see through my magic..." Julius mutters in defeat, and the magic aura covering us changes. He's removed the spell making us invisible.

Once we're visible, Aela's fairy gapes at us.

"Whaaaa?! Hey, aren't they Analia's...!" she shrieks in a high-pitched voice.

Prince Guido studies us with piercing scrutiny. "Analians?! Wait, I recognize the man... You can't possibly be Julius Eldorad Griffith of the Demon Lord's Four Grand Magi, can you?!" he accuses, unnerved.

Julius, said to be the most powerful Grand Magi in his time, is apparently just as famous among Gaeans. Even Aela, who couldn't have known we were the generals of the country she's at war with, lets the surprise show on her face.

"...I'm no longer a Grand Magi," Julius gruffly retorts.

Laurent walks over to him and bows his head. "I'm sorry, Master. I snapped when he pointed a sword at Lady Elle..."

"I understand. I would've done it if you hadn't," Julius says, comforting him in an unusually master-like tone, then shifts his intimidating gaze to Aela. "Our identities matter not. Woman, how did you know we were hiding here?"

Aela seems a little unsure of how to proceed after learning she's dealing with one of the enemy's Grand Magi, but she nods once after closely studying Julius.

"I have the powers granted to me by God. I do not believe you to be the evil sort," she says with a saintly smile.

Wow, she can smile like that even before the intimidation devil known as Julius. I wouldn't expect any less of the woman I used to admire!

I nod along with her reaction as I hold up the real woman to her manga version. Yup, yup! Aela has the special powers God gave her.

Having left the Fairy Realm on a journey to defeat the Demon Lord, Lylish discovers Aela, a girl with the potential to become a saint, and grants her the powers of some powerful entity she calls "God." Fairies are a special species rarely seen in these lands. They're said to have taught humans how to use magic but have since retreated to seclusion in their original realm because they couldn't adapt to the magic particles of the human world.

However, the devastation of the human world leads to the devastation of the fairy realm, and so Lylish journeys to save the human world from the Demon Lord's destruction, empowering Aela along the way. Their whole backstory is right out of a fantasy novel. Well, it *is* a fantasy manga.

Anyway, that's why Aela can use an amazing, miraculous class of magic unattainable by human sorcerers.

"God? How quaint. Such beings aren't real... But you're free to believe what

you want. After all, I can't let you leave here alive now that you've discovered us." Julius drops that line like a villain, his intent to kill them palpable.

I'm not his target and I've still got goose bumps from it.

Scary. I keep forgetting that Julius is Analia's strongest Grand Magi...and not necessarily a "good" guy.

"Damn you!" Guido curses and swings down his enchanted sword. But it snags on an invisible wall halfway. "Tch! A magic shield!"

Julius flicks his wrist like he's swatting an irritating fly, blowing Guido back until his head slams into the wall. Guido slides down and struggles to get up right away after being hit by a far more powerful attack than Laurent's gust of wind.

But, as you should expect of a *shounen* hero, he thrusts his sword into the floor and uses it to unsteadily rise off the ground. Pretty impressive he's able to stand after that blow.

"Oh? You can stand after taking a direct hit from me?" Julius comments, a hint of amusement entering his otherwise deadpan voice.

Meanwhile, I'm sitting on pins and needles over how he's been reciting lines right out of the villain playbook! Is this what they call a Bad Ending flag? Are things going to be okay like this?

Also, maybe everyone has let it escape their notice, but we're inside an Elle Village mansion! Please don't play out a mini-boss fight right here!

"Master Julius doesn't show mercy, does he?" Laurent mutters beside me.

Right? Anyone who sees this would think so. Also, his word choice captures just the right amount of cool villainy. I'm in awe.

For that matter, is Julius serious about killing them...? The death aura pouring off him is real. Goose bumps are still prickling my flesh.

Honestly, I'm scared of Saint Aela's group. I mean, they might kill me...

But I don't want to see them get killed here, either. After all, I know from the manga that they're really good people. I don't want to let Aela's story end before it's supposed to.

“J-Julius. Th-That’s enough, I think. They aren’t so bad, and they got rid of that sleazy messenger for us!” I say, drawing this fact to his attention and grabbing hold of his arm.

He frowns and groans my name. “Elle...”

Silence reigns.

In that moment of impasse, Saint Aela runs over to the barely standing Guido. She puts her arm around his shoulder and looks back at us.

“Why don’t we...talk first? I still am not convinced that you are bad people. You have a reason for not wanting us to leave here alive, right? I can help you.”

She must be shaken up and angry after seeing her dear friend thrown against the wall like a rag doll, but her unflinching gaze reveals neither emotion.

Julius and Aela hold each other’s gaze.

It feels like a needle is pricking my heart.

I know this is not the time for it, but it hurts seeing them exchange looks.

“...Elle,” Julius calls while I’m sinking into depression, “you do not want me to kill them, right?”

“What?! Ah, yeah. That’s right. I don’t want them to die. I guarantee you that they’re not bad people!” I say, vehemently defending them.

Julius exhales a long breath and strides over to Guido. “I’m sorry. Can you stand?”

Guido slaps away Julius’s hand. “Don’t come near me,” he seethes.

Yeah, it’d come across as a slap in the face if the person who sent you flying asks if you can stand. Poor guy.

“Please sit still, Your Highness. I’ll heal your wounds. Close your eyes,” Aela instructs, pressing her forehead against his.

Oooh! I know what’s going on! Aela’s using the recovery spell unique to her!

It’s an awesome ability where just by pressing her forehead against another will heal the person’s wounds in the blink of an eye. This is it! Part of the magic that earned her the title of saint.

It's no big secret that Analia has no healing spells. About the only thing we have to heal ourselves are the elixirs made by the DemiOracle.

Recovery magic is extremely valuable!

My inner fangirl is itching to get out and take a closer look at Aela's magic, but an already healed Guido stands up before I can.

He glares at Julius, letting him know he's ready to fight. Saint Aela stands between them with a troubled smile.

I've read enough manga to feel like I'm watching a love triangle scene unfold between them.

Just thinking of it that way...agitates me. Why? It's so strange.

I adored these kinds of scenes when I read the manga...

Chapter 7: Saint Aela's Party

AFTER everything was said and done, we changed rooms because the two men were staring each other down with a murderous gleam in their eyes inside the parlor they'd laid waste to during their brief skirmish. Trembling, Jasper suggested we move our discussions elsewhere to clear the air a bit.

Jasper's courage is on a whole other level, being able to propose a change in location amid that deadly mood. It doesn't matter that he was shaking worse than a tree in a hurricane while he said it, either. I wouldn't want to be the one to break that deadlock.

I nominate Jasper as one of the Four Grand Magi of Elle Village.

Thanks to the bravery of our new Grand Magi Jasper, we decided to have an amicable chat over a pleasant dinner. Thus, a dinner party with me, Julius, Aela, Lylish, Guido, and Golem began at the dining table, which was covered in dishes whipped up by our master chef with vegetables picked right from the fields.

Julius wanted me to sit this one out, but I flatly refused. Why should I? This is Elle Village! My village! I don't want them deciding things while I'm absent.

Plus, I'd hate for Julius to kill Prince Guido the second I step out of the room.

On another note, our newly appointed Grand Magi, Jasper the Trembler, was trembling so much I asked him to rest in another room.

At any rate, there's something inspirational about being in a room where all my favorite characters from the manga have gathered.

The dinner party started in silence as everyone watched to see who would make the first move.

"I'll begin this by telling you what you all want to know at the outset," Julius says, breaking the silence first. "I was undeniably one of the Four Grand Magi of the Demon Lord's Army. However, I have since severed my ties to Analia. Or, to be precise, I am attempting to sever said connection. I am a fugitive now. I'm

hiding in this village on the outskirts of Gaea. You fear me, but I have absolutely no interest in attacking Gaea.”

“...You expect us to believe that?” Golem growls, taking Julius apart with his unsparing gaze.

Julius coolly lets that glare slide off him. “Whatever you choose to believe has no bearing on the fact that I currently have no designs on attacking Gaea. I wouldn’t choose such a roundabout method as living in Gaea if I was planning to invade. Brute force would be enough to squash you from Analia. You should be more than well aware of that when you’re barely holding on to your borders,” he states definitively, getting a rise out of Golem and Guido.

Yeah, uh, what he’s saying isn’t wrong, but couldn’t he have found a nicer way to put it?

Julius shifts his icy gaze over to Aela, paying the angry men no mind. “You said you would assist me?”

“Yes. I don’t sense any evil from you. I will help you if there’s something troubling you. I am a saint; I gained this power from God in order to help good people. Whoever you may have been in the past and whatever you may have done is of no consequence—I choose to believe in my intuition about who you are now,” she answers with a serene smile, which only makes Golem’s scowl deepen.

“Lady Aela, how can you trust *it* so easily?” Golem snarls with utter disgust and crosses his arms. “I have certainly heard of your ability to determine if a person is good or evil, but that *thing* there is Julius the Cruel and Merciless of the Demon Lord’s Four Grand Magi. He has killed many Gaeans.”

He hasn’t eaten or drunk a single thing laid out on the table. Nor does he intend to.

A justified decision, considering we’ve been enemies up until now. It took Golem a long time to accept Julius in the manga, too. He finally comes to trust him after Julius saves Aela from near death more than a dozen times.

Prince Guido quietly nods in agreement with Golem.

“I’m also against this—is what I would like to say right now, but it won’t be

too late to pass judgment after we hear them out. I do apologize for suddenly trying to run my blade through you on sight. I lost my head in the spur of the moment and acted on impulse,” he apologizes in the clerical tones of a politician trying to smooth over a bad situation.

While he hasn’t taken the aggressive stance of Golem, he also isn’t touching his food and he’s watching Julius like a hawk.

“Your apology is unwarranted. I also lost my cool in the moment. I came very close to killing all of you. It’s only natural for you to react in defense to my murderous intentions like prey often does,” Julius says without any malice.

Red splotches spread across Golem’s face, and he slams his fists on the table and rises.

That’s dangerous! Chef’s consommé soup is gonna spill over!

“Bastard! You tried to kill His Highness and Saint Aela!” Golem fumes, as if to say his action is deserving of death.

But come on, man. It’s bad manners to hit the table while people are eating! My soup would’ve spilled if I hadn’t lifted the bowl off the table a fraction of a second sooner! I saved Julius’s, too.

“Hey! Don’t spill my soup! And you’re going on blaming us for stuff, but aren’t you the rude ones for refusing to touch the food we served you? It’s incredibly delicious! The most amazing thing you’ll ever have the honor of being served!” I emphasize in a fit.

I deserve to throw a fit! Golem’s gratuitous table slam caused every other bowl of soup except for mine and Julius’s to spill over, ruining the beautiful table arrangement. And mine and Julius’s would’ve joined the mess if I hadn’t saved them in time!

My roared complaint causes Golem to turn a wary eye on me. It’s like he’s only just now noticing I exist. He’s got the face of someone wondering why a child is sitting at the adults’ table.

My, how rude! Just so you know, I’m considered a bona fide adult in Analia, where anyone over fifteen is an adult.

“What in the world is the story with this...little lady...?” Golem asks Julius after he thoroughly scrutinizes me.

His choice of words in describing a fine woman like me crosses deep into the realm of rudeness, but so be it. Answering who I am is a boon unto this world!

I suck in a deep breath to tell him that I love Elle Village the most and am the most loved by Elle Village—but Julius covers my mouth.

All the air I inhaled can't be exhaled into proper words with his hand in the way.

As I'm choking on muffled words, Julius coolly answers in my place. “She can be saved for later. I want to hear your thoughts first. Will you help me or not?”

Hey, man! Why am I getting pushed off for later?! Let me introduce myself! Lemme say my trademark phrase!

“Your impudence goes too far! I'd never help you!” Golem lashes out.

“I see,” Julius answers, offended. “Then don't. All I want is the woman Aela and her ability to see through magic.”

My heart drops.

“All I want is you, Aela.”

I know that line. It's the most impactful line Julius says to Aela in the manga. It's what he tells her when she asks him if his heart doesn't ache after betraying Analia and defeating the rest of the Grand Magi he once called allies.

I wonder if he's starting to fall for Aela like he's meant to...

Agitation mounting, I study his eyes as they're fixed on Aela. He drops his gaze slightly, apparently shifting his attention to the fairy riding on her shoulder.

“I can also use that fairy sitting there. I never thought I would encounter one out of hiding from the Fairy Realm. I've heard fairies are more accomplished sorcerers than humans. Legend has it that they were the ones who spread sorcery through the human world. Golem, was it? Your assistance is unrequired. You may go if you wish.” Julius dismisses him the same he would a bumbling servant past his years.

Golem turns crimson and yells “Bastard...!” and lunges across the table at him. Prince Guido grabs him by the shoulder and pulls him back into his seat.

“Golem, don’t let him goad you. Calm down...,” he advises his friend, then turns a penetratingly cold gaze on Julius. “Don’t provoke us, Julius. Remaining calm is difficult when I think of all the things you’ve done to Gaea. If it were up to me, I would kill you right now.”

The hatred blazing in his eyes frankly gives me the chills, but Julius returns the gaze with his usual lack of expression. That’s Julius for you. The strongest of the Four Grand Magi is different from the rest of us. He fears and feels nothing.

Or so I thought, but after a long pause, Julius ever so slightly lowers his gaze.

“...A valid point. My apologies. I wasn’t trying to provoke you.”

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah! A-Apology! Oh my Demon Lord! Julius apologized!

Everyone, including me, looks at him in utter shock. Commandeering everyone’s full attention, Julius continues to speak with his eyes cast down.

“I’ll be honest with you...I have no experience seeking help. I don’t understand how to interact beyond threats. But regardless of my unease in this matter, I still want to borrow your assistance.”

Every member of Saint Aela’s party reacts with surprise over Julius’s commendable confession. Even I’m a little shaken up by the way he’s acting. After all, while he’s relatively amicable with the people of Elle Village, he treats all outsiders like they’re the enemy to be annihilated.

Because when all’s said and done, he’s still the former commander of the Demon Lord’s Army. Up until I asked him not to kill anyone here, he had resumed his role as an evil general wanting to wipe out Saint Aela’s group just for having discovered us.

Saint Aela’s team is too shocked for words, but it’s Saint Aela herself who doesn’t seem too surprised and answers him first. “You are faced with that great an obstacle that you are willing to seek out our help. What is it that troubles you so?” she asks.

Yes! That’s what I want to know! It’s been bothering me this whole time!

The thing is, I participated in this dinner party as mayor without really knowing the point of it. What is it that's brought Julius to the point of apologizing and practically begging Saint Aela for her help?

Julius, who has been dominating everyone's attention during this deathly silent dinner party, quietly answers her. "I want you to join me in defeating the Demon Lord."

Huh? Join him in defeating the Demon Lord?

Tension runs through the dinner party.

"I would gladly destroy the Demon Lord on my own, but certain circumstances will make it hard to do so through normal means," Julius continues while everyone is too startled to speak. "Every time I venture into town, I hear rumors of Saint Aela. I just witnessed your saintly powers for myself and they are quite real. With your powers on my side, I might be able to demolish the Demon Lord."

"D-Demolish the Demon Lord?" Lylish cries out in a shrill voice from where she's elegantly perched on Saint Aela's shoulder. "Do you seriously mean that? You, one of the Four Grand Magi?"

"...I'm serious. I am no longer one of Analia's Four Grand Magi, nor do I belong to the Demon Lord. I am merely a man who loves living in this rural village," Julius admits.

"What's your real goal?" Prince Guido asks, giving Julius a once-over. "Are you asking us to help you usurp the throne? Planning to depose the current Demon Lord so you can become Analia's next ruler?"

"I have no such plans. I simply wish to live out my life in peace once the Demon Lord is defeated. Protecting this peaceful lifestyle is my only goal," Julius quietly confesses.

Prince Guido's eyes go rounder than the saucer on the table, betraying the depth of his surprise. But the hard contours of his face immediately soften.

"Live in peace, huh...? I never expected to hear that word from you," he says with a gentleness that'd been absent from his voice until now.

I think some of the barbed edges in Prince Guido's attitude toward Julius have dulled. But Golem's scowl is just as distrustful as the start.

"I'll never believe such blatant lies from a man known to all the world as merciless and ruthless! Don't fall for his deceit, Your Highness. This devil is scheming something!"

Prince Guido nods twice, then thrice to Golem's warning.

Beside him, Saint Aela also offers up her advice. "He speaks the truth. No lies or deceit color his words. I trust him."

Prince Guido nods in agreement with her as well. He flashes the mischievous grin of a child playing two sides.

"Sorry, Golem. It seems I have taken quite a liking to him... He wants to defeat the Demon Lord in order to live in peace? Haha! Julius the Merciless does! Have you ever heard anything more amusing than that?!" he exclaims, letting out a real laugh.

"Can I take that as you agreeing to assist me?" Julius confirms over the prince's laughter.

"Absolutely," Prince Guido vows. "Also, to be clear, defeating the Demon Lord is our greatest wish. Whether you ask it of us or not, we won't stray from that goal."

Oh yeah, that's exactly what they're after. Knowing the manga, I know why Saint Aela's group is traveling the world. Right now it's a journey to save Gaea, but they will eventually infiltrate Analia and head for the Demon Lord's castle—to defeat the Demon Lord.

Saint Aela's smiling over Prince Guido's decision, but Golem isn't pleased, obviously.

"Overthrowing the Demon Lord's definitely our greatest ambition, but joining hands with one of them is playing with fire...!" he objects.

"Golem, I understand where you're coming from," Prince Guido concedes with a sorry smile. "...Many of Gaea's soldiers have been slaughtered by Analia's army. But put another way, our armies have killed a great number of Analian

sorcerers as well. We have been killing each other—that is the way of war. And I don't doubt that more Gaeans have been killed. But does having more kills make one side eviler than the other? Is it a matter of how many you killed?"

He lets that question hang in the air.

"If it's a matter of numbers, you should also consider that Analia has a much smaller population than Gaea. Furthermore, I've heard that Analia's army isn't made up of soldiers and volunteers who have sworn loyalty to the king like in Gaea. It's said that their side is made up of sorcerers with no battle experience suddenly taking to the battlefield upon nomination by their Demon Lord. Doesn't that mean we've been killing mostly civilians all this time?" Prince Guido passionately appeals to his knight.

Golem lets out a low, rumbling groan and bites his tongue. He doesn't appear completely convinced, but he loudly exhales and heavily slumps back in his chair as if to signal he will obey his prince's orders.

Ooh! Prince Guido is as open-minded and cool as I hoped he'd be! That's the way one of the lead male characters from a manga oughta be! And even Golem matches perfectly with his manga character. He's so cool in his own way. Golem's aggressiveness toward Julius comes from his concern for Prince Guido and Aela. He cares about his allies.

I'm getting all excited and impressed by the group of characters I fawned over when they were just drawings on a piece of paper.

I'm observing Prince Guido and the others when I sense a pair of eyes on me and look to my right. There, I find Julius pouting. Why does he look so upset?

He quickly looks away when our eyes meet and returns his attention to Prince Guido.

"Thank you for thinking of Analia's citizens. However, Analia is made up of people who don't think twice about dying for the Demon Lord. There are many sorcerers who are suddenly thrust into the army without any special training like you mentioned, but I doubt they feel any fear."

"I see... Then that's even worse on us for killing people with no will of their own under the guise of war. Haha. I've come to despise the Demon Lord even

more now. That's a ruler who thinks nothing of the people. No doubt the Demon Lord views the citizens of Analia as little more than useful puppets... But you seem different. A puppet would never think of turning on the puppeteer," Prince Guido points out, holding Julius's gaze.

His expression is clear of the tension and suspicion he had at first. The mood in the room has grown more serene, too.

As I'm picking apart the moment, I catch Prince Guido looking at me.

"With that out of the way, I would love it if you would introduce the adorable young lady with you now. I heard the villagers address her as Lady Elle. Where does she hail from?"

Oh! It's here! The marvelous time for me to introduce myself!

My excitement swells in anticipation.

I glance over at Julius to check if I'm good to go. *Can I say it?! I can say it, right?!*

Julius furrows his brow slightly when he notices my antsy gaze and seems to consider it for a moment. Then he turns to look at the prince.

"Guido, let me confirm it with you officially. You are willing to help me defeat the Demon Lord, correct?"

"Do you even need to ask? Like I said, we're after the same thing."

"I see...", Julius says, still reluctant.

Why are you so resistant to me talking about myself?! Bah! I can't wait any longer.

I rise from my chair. "I'm more than happy to tell you who I am if you wish to know! For I am— Mmph!"

Julius covered my mouth again! My words came out muffled!

WHY?! Why won't you let me say it?!

"Forgive me. I would rather not hide things from possible allies in defeating the Demon Lord, but it's more important to me that word about her does not make it back to the Demon Lord... Will you vow not to speak of her outside

these walls?”

Prince Guido seems a little baffled by Julius’s frantic insistence. “Of course. You have my word. But why the secrecy?”

Julius drops his hand from my mouth.

“What the heck, Julius?!” I huff with my first gasp of air. “Why do you keep getting in the way of my grand introduction?!”

“You heard my answer to the prince. I don’t want the Demon Lord to discover you, no matter the cost. Please stop being so quick and careless to reveal yourself every chance you get.”

“I’m not quick and careless when I reveal myself! I always take GREAT care when I announce my name! I make sure to use over fifty words every time!”

“I’m not talking about the care you put into your introduction.”

He’s not? Then what’s he talking about?

I frown, completely at a loss over what obstinate Julius is trying to say. Prince Guido’s entertained laughter fills the room.

Uh, why is he suddenly laughing?

He has a good, hard laugh and wipes the tears from his eyes. “Haha! Did you seek help from us when it’s so out of character for you because of her?” he asks Julius, amused.

“Yes, that is why,” Julius asserts. “I want to give her freedom. The kind where she can live without fear of another.”

Julius was being such an obstinate goat, but then he had to go and give that embarrassing answer. I can’t help but look at him.

“J-Julius...,” I call without thinking. He slowly turns his gaze to me.

“I want to live with her in this village enjoying peace and quiet without being controlled by anyone,” he says with his usual cool visage, but the look he is giving me feels so hot, my heart squeezes.

Could it be that...Julius...me— No! Don’t go there!

I wrench my gaze away and look down.

...Crap! Crap! Crap! I nearly let myself get the wrong idea.

The kinda wrong idea like Julius might have feelings for me...

Julius is going to fall in love with Aela. He's going to love her. I can't get the wrong idea. I tend to misunderstand things a lot. Heck, I've lived my whole life under one big fat misunderstanding. I don't want to go back to being the girl who lived her life based on the misconception that she was loved by the Demon Lord.

"Hehehe. You two must be very close," Aela says with a delicate laugh. Even Guido and Golem are starting to look at us like we're an adorable sight to behold.

What is it?! What's that look trying to convey?! I s-swear I'm not misinterpreting the situation!

"Wh-What's with that look?! D-Don't get the wrong idea! Also, before we get into all this side talk, Julius, I need to talk to you first! How are we supposed to defeat the Demon Lord when it's that?! How do we defeat *that*?!" I emphasize in a loud voice.

I mean, the Demon Lord's real identity is a magic circle that takes up an entire underground room!

"What?!" The fairy on Aela's shoulder takes flight. "You people know the true identity of the Demon Lord?!"

Julius sits up straight. "I need to inform you about what the Demon Lord really is for us to win. The truth may be hard to believe. Nevertheless, what I am about to tell you is true. Are you prepared to believe me and face the truth?"

Prince Guido, Aela, and Golem nod—but then Julius abruptly springs to his feet. He jumped up so fast, the soup spilled on the table.

Hey! That's my soup! I look up at Julius to complain...and swallow my words. He's paler than the white tablecloth.

"Julius? What's wrong?"

"Someone just teleported into the village center..." he says, then runs over to the window and throws it open so hard, the shades bang against the wall.

I rush after him and nervously peer outside.

I activate Analyze in my right eye and see the shimmer of a magic circle in the blue sky. That circle floating in the air is for a teleportation spell. And three people just leaped down from it?

There's one person I don't recognize, but the other two are...

"Sereniel the Temptress and Steel Regulus...?! " I utter the names of my former allies.

Chapter 8: The Four Grand Magi of the Demon Lord's Army

I don't believe my eyes. Our village was just invaded by the remaining two Grand Magi of the Demon Lord's Army. The names I muttered reach Saint Aela's group sitting at the table and make them nervous.

"Sereniel the Temptress? Isn't that the Demon Lord Army's second in command?!" Golem guesses and rushes over to look out the window. He groans when he confirms it's her. "I've seen her on the battlefield before. That's Sereniel all right!"

Yes, as he said, that's Sereniel standing in the center of the village. Regulus is there with her. There's also some hunched weakling wearing round glasses I don't know. Wait. I might've seen him somewhere before... Hmm. Can't remember.

But why are Sereniel and Regulus here?

What did they come for? To get us? How did they find this village...?

"Hoo-hoo! I figured it out! You villains! You set us up! Aela! You can't believe these evil generals! They gathered these villagers here to kill us!"

I whirl toward that shrill voice. Fairy Lylish is glaring at us with her arms crossed and cheeks puffed out.

Huh? She's casting doubt on me and Julius?

Julius places himself between me and Saint Aela's group as if they are now a possible threat. I poke my head out from behind his broad back.

"Wh-Why are you jumping to conclusions?!" I shout. "We aren't involved with them! I have no idea why those two came here, either...!"

"Hmph! Save your blatant lies for the deaf and blind! The proof is in all four of you Grand Magi showing up at the same time!"

Lylish's accusations are actively turning the rest of Aela's group against us.

"That can't be true! They haven't done anything evil!" Aela argues on our behalf, but it does nothing to erase her party's grim scowls.

"...Our discussion was a trap?" Prince Guido asks Julius.

"Didn't you hear me?! I said we don't know what's going on!" I insist. "Come on, Julius, tell them! These guys are doubting us— Whoa, Julius?"

What kind of face is that to make? Julius is assessing Saint Aela's group with hatred like I've never seen before roaring to life in his stormy blue eyes. Chills scrape down my spine. That's how much rage is billowing off him.

"You were in cahoots with Analia?! How dare you give away our location...!" Julius growls, infuriated. I sense wind magic surging through him.

Julius, the calmest and strongest sorcerer, is so angry his magic is going out of control?

"J-Julius. Calm down...," I urge, reaching for his arm, but his rampaging magic pressure prevents my hand from reaching him.

"I'll kill you all...!" he swears in a deadly voice. The frigid magic pouring off him unleashes on the room with the explosive power of a tornado.

The pressure is so great it'd whip me into the air if I didn't brace myself with magic. Many of Chef's special dishes are ripped into the whirlwind along with the tablecloth.

Julius! You know better than to waste food! If he can do that to Meide's awesome food, he's seriously gonna annihilate Aela's group, too!

I get why he doubts them, but they aren't bad people. They can't die now.

I look at Aela's group barely holding their ground against the tornado-turned-blizzard and shout, "Run! NOW!"

One look at this scene and it's easy to see that Aela's group isn't strong enough to stand up to Julius yet. Even in the manga, they never defeated him since he joined their side before it mattered.

One of Aela's group flies into the overwhelming pressure straight at Julius.

The fairy Lylish.

She's so light and dainty like a flower, the raging winds look like they'll tear her wing from wing. But magic pressure seems to have less effect on fairies.

Unable to push through Julius's blizzard, Lylish flies in front of Aela and spreads out her arms. "Aela! I'll handle things here! Run away with the others!" she orders, glaring at Julius.

"B-But I can't leave you!" Aela objects, but Lylish shakes her head without looking back, her eyes locked on the enemy.

"You can't stay. You're the saint I picked. I can't let you get killed. Guido! Golem! Hurry up and drag Aela away!" she begs of the others.

Indecision wavers in Guido's tormented eyes as he looks from Aela's face to Julius's. "Forgive me, Lylish... Gaea needs Aela. I can't allow her to die here." He scoops Aela into his arms and runs to the door.

"Wait, Prince Guido! Lylish is still there! Lylish will—Lylish will!" Aela screams, but he still reaches for the door with her locked in his firm grip.

"I won't let you!"

Julius holds out his right hand. From it, something pyrokinetic spawns and fires toward Saint Aela and Guido, but before it hits them, Lylish forms a barrier and stops it.

"Are you deaf? I'm your opponent!" Lylish taunts with a grin.

Ooh, Lylish is so cool! Was she always meant to be such a cool character? I'm pretty sure in the manga she was more of a support character meant to be the series's mascot.

The way she blocked Julius's attack falls more in line with the big-sister archetype than the cute-mascot type. Then again, her barrier was more of a faulty last-minute defense, leaving her hands scorched black.

Will she be able to survive another hit...?

Bah! This isn't the time for me to be sitting around watching like some sort of bystander. I'm not reading a manga here! I've gotta stop Julius! Even if he scares me!

“Julius! Calm down and think this through! Why are you so angry all of a sudden?!” I shout, but he’s too furious to notice as he activates several magic circles at the same time.

Several dozen Light Bullets generated by his magic hover around Julius.

Not even Lylish can block that many!

“Why aren’t you calming down like I’m asking you to?! I-Ice Gate!”

Desperate to protect Aela and the others from Julius’s spell, I do a quick cast.

Although the thick wall of ice successfully prevents Julius’s bullets from flaying Lylish, it doesn’t mean I’ve gotten any better at controlling more delicate spells like this. And it’s even worse when I’m under so much pressure; I can’t stop the output! The ice spreads from the floor, freezing over the furniture and crawling up the walls.

Brrr! It’s cold.

Golem yelps and pulls his hand back from the doorknob. “Ow! What the magic hell?! The door is frozen shut! She locked us in!” he roars.

Oh dear. My attempt to help them escape trapped them... Really gotta work on my rescue skills.

“Elle, you froze the room...to tell me to cool my head?”

Yay! Julius interpreted my magic slipup in a helpful way! Better yet, when he looks at me, his eyes aren’t full of just hatred, but emotional turmoil. I’m so relieved he’s no longer the frightening Julius controlled by his own anger.

“Because you won’t listen to me! Do I have to freeze a room for you to chill out?!”

“But they’re in league with the Demon Lord,” Julius says in a low voice, his glacial eyes narrowing on Aela.

Her group is watching us with the same level of confusion.

“Th-They can’t be. I mean, she’s Saint Aela?”

“Then what other explanation is there for Analia’s Grand Magi to come when they’re here?! How was our location leaked? This village is protected by *my*

magic. And yet they were able to teleport right into the center of those defenses! That can only be possible if a Demon Lord spy is with them!”

“That’s...a possibility I can’t deny, but— Crap, Julius! Sereniel and Regulus are already here! Now’s not the time for a debate—”

Julius pulls me to his chest while I’m still talking.

What?! Wh-Why is he suddenly hugging me?!

The answer comes in a powerful shockwave that cleaves through the area I was standing.

I’m in one piece thanks to Julius’s Shield, but the room, along with the furniture, walls, and the thick layer of ice, is shredded into tiny pieces and blown away.

The whole room, including the ceiling, is ripped off its foundation, revealing the blue sky above. I glance down the hill to where Regulus has one fist thrust in our direction and Sereniel’s crimson lips are curled in a pert smile.



“Ohh, my precious Lord Julius. I’ve missed you, darling. You’re such a cruel man, taking off without me,” she purrs. She’s dressed in nothing more than black-and-gold armor lingerie and a purple cape.

Beside her, Regulus swings his right arm to loosen the joint. “Hrm. Can my Fanged Wolf King Fists kill Julius?”

So the magic that blasted half the house away was Regulus’s doing. He gave his attack a cool name like Fanged Wolf King Fists, but all he did was apply basic wind magic to enhance the pressure and power of his punch.

I hear a sound behind me and look back just as Saint Aela and Prince Guido are climbing out of the rubble. Their clothes are covered in dust and dirt from the collapsed building, but they’re otherwise unharmed.

It seems Lylish protected the other three with her last ounce of strength. She’s lying unconscious on Saint Aela’s palm. Aela cradles her in both hands.

Lylish...

I won’t let Sereniel and Regulus get away with this! I raise my sharp gaze from the rubble to glare at the Grand Magi and gasp.

It’s only now that I’m looking around that I realize...my beloved Elle Village has been partially destroyed!

Regulus’s single attack wiped out not only the room we were in, but also half the mansion behind it, and shattered every single window of the buildings within a half-mile radius.

But who the hell cares about the buildings?! What matters most is—

“H-How are the villagers?!” I scream. Hot wind roars to life around me. My magic is starting to go out of control in tandem with my emotions.

Stop! I have to suppress my feelings and my magic! But I don’t see anyone around... I can’t stop worrying... I can’t suppress my emotions!

“Calm down, Elle. It’s all right. I entrusted the villagers to Laurent,” Julius soothes.

I jerk my head up and look at him. He slips his fingers into mine and squeezes

my hand reassuringly. The burning heat radiating from me shuts off like a valve was turned.

“You left them with Laurent? Meaning they’re safe?”

Julius gives a big nod.

They are?! Now that I’m a little calmer, I don’t see any injured or unconscious villagers strewn about the half-destroyed village. Then that means everyone got away safely?!

“They should be safe for now. We need to focus on what to do about these pests first. And we also need to eliminate the Gaeon pretending to be a saint,” Julius whispers next to my ear.

The Gaeon pretending to be a saint? That’s Aela, right?

“Wh-Why won’t you listen?! Aela isn’t...” I pause in the middle of defending her, because her group does seem suspicious.

Are they linked to the Demon Lord? The manga never covered that.

But, wait, I haven’t read the last volume... Was a traitor uncovered in the final volume? Or are there people acting out of character just like I am not like manga Elle?

I turn around and take a good look at Aela’s group. Aela is desperately casting recovery spells on Lylish, but they aren’t having any effect. It’s probably too late for her...

Even so, Saint Aela casts spell after spell through her sobs while Prince Guido watches over her, grieved. And then there’s Golem, who’s keeping a careful eye on us and Sereniel. He looks prepared to sacrifice himself to protect the other two should the need arise.

From what I can observe of these three, they are the mirror images of their manga counterparts—there’s nothing suspicious about them. They are strong, kind people who reject evil and believe in justice. I just can’t see them as the bad guys...

“Julius...Aela isn’t evil. If defeating the Demon Lord is your goal, then you will absolutely need her.”

“But...,” he mutters, a pensive look on his face.

I leave him to his thoughts and face Aela. “You three should run away. Staying here will only get you killed!”

“But Lylish is—”

“Lylish won’t be able to rest in peace if you die!” I tell her. Her face crumbles.

“...Aela, we have to go,” Prince Guido says in hushed tones. Aela stands in silence. Strong determination to live on replaces her tears.

That’s the Aela I know. She won’t give up no matter the obstacle that gets in her way. She has the power to stand up after she’s been knocked down and push forward.

“Sorry... And thank you. I’ll return the favor someday,” Prince Guido vows.

I nod without a word. And then I hear the pitter-patter of feet hitting the ground running.

I’m so glad they ran away. Because Saint Aela is an absolute necessity. Saint Aela is the one who will end the Demon Lord’s reign.

“Elle...you are too soft,” Julius sighs in exasperation, although he overlooks their escape. He could stop them if he wanted to.

“I’m not as soft as you might think... Besides, we lack the luxury of dealing with Saint Aela anymore,” I say, returning my gaze to Sereniel.

We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Because whoever is responsible for bringing them doesn’t change the fact that two of the Four Grand Magi are here and waiting for our next move. Trying to take on Saint Aela with them present would put even the strongest Grand Magi at a disadvantage.

Most of all, I can’t forgive them for destroying my precious Elle Village! Everyone should be safe if Julius is right, but the buildings are toppled, and when I take a good look around, ice has spread everywhere. What did they have to gain from freezing over Elle Village?! The monsters!

Er...wait, is my magic responsible for freezing the village? I d-don’t have time to overthink things right now! This is all Sereniel and Regulus’s fault! Yeah! I won’t let them get away with it!

I glare at Sereniel and her coy smile.

“Hm-mm? I was watching to see what you would do, but I didn’t think it’d be that. Are you attached to those Gaeans, Elle? You’re as strange as they come,” Sereniel says with a chuckle.

“Shut up! Zip your trap, you old bat! You show off too much skin for your age! It’s been bothering me since the day we met, so dress more age appropriate, would ya?!” I nag, crossing my arms.

“What?” Sereniel utters, looking like she didn’t understand what I said at first. Red rapidly rushes to her cheeks. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha-What did you just call me?! An old bat?! You just crossed the line, Elle!” she screeches like a messenger from hell.

Her polished composure slides off her face as she looks at me, crimson with rage. Her face says it all: “I despise the young.”

Oh my, how scary. Maybe I went a bit too far goading her...

I hide behind Julius to escape from Sereniel’s high-voltage anger.

“Whoa, hold your horses there, Sereniel. Please don’t tear Elle apart in your rage, okay? We have to return with her heart in perfect shape,” says the glasses-wearing weakling hiding in Regulus’s and Sereniel’s shadows, sounding exasperated.

Er, did I just hear him say something super disturbing about my heart? Moreover, who the heck is that? I kinda recognize him from somewhere...but where? Since he’s working with Sereniel and Regulus, is he a new Grand Magi? If he’s my successor, then he might be someone from the Centers for Magic Research. Maybe that’s why I recognize him.

But the majority of people working there throw themselves into whatever research the Demon Lord orders them to do and rarely ever interact with the other researchers.

“I know my orders! I’ll make sure to bring Elle back alive! I don’t want to hear another peep out of you, Clark! You’re such an arrogant prick for a new guy!”

“So you say, but I’m mostly in agreement with what Elle said. You show off

too much skin, Sereniel. According to the data I've collected, walking around in Gaea in that getup will have you mistaken for a nymphomaniac or a slut."

"HUH?! Clark, I'd shut that arrogant trap of yours before I sew it shut with magic! Oho, I get it now! You only have the hots for younger women! Every foolish male who doesn't understand my mature beauty can drop dead!"

"Did you hear a word I said? It's a matter of integrity, not youth," Glasses Man stresses.

Sereniel looks like a demon ready to bite his head off.

Scary.

Wait, Sereniel just called Glasses there Clark. I've heard that name before. But where? Mm...was it a long time ago...or recently?

I've got it...!

That's right! Clark's one of those! A character I saw in the manga! Saint Aela's enemy who shows up in the last half of the series. He's the new villain who pops up on the Demon Lord's side after Saint Aela defeats three of the Grand Magi and Julius switches sides, drastically decreasing Analia's firepower. Mad scientist Clark!

Instead of fighting on the battlefield like the rest of the Grand Magi, he's a nuisance of an enemy who uses the DemiOracle's blood to make homunculi that he sics on Saint Aela. I remember he was doing some sorta special research, too. I never found out what it was because I didn't read the last volume, but it was hinted to be extremely dangerous and end-of-the-series worthy.

Did he already rise to power because Julius and I left the Four Grand Magi early on? But I just don't get the same deadly vibes from this guy, especially while Sereniel has him by the collar and is shaking him around like a rag doll.

"Sereniel, let go of Clark. He helped us find this place. Besides, I know the true answer. A woman's beauty isn't in her youth...it's her breasts. And I have a clear view of yours in that outfit—I love it," Regulus comments from the side. And it's a comment that crosses right into sexual harassment.

Sereniel instantly stops thrashing Clark and slowly turns toward Regulus.

“O-Oh my, Regulus. You’re flirting in front of all these people? What am I supposed to do with you?” she simpers, her cheeks turning pink, and fidgets like a school girl even after she drops Clark on his butt. She casually rests her arm under her breasts, emphasizing her cleavage.

Wow! Just how easy are you, Sereniel?!

“I’m starting to feel ashamed of myself for losing my cool that badly over these fools invading our territory,” Julius mutters under his breath.

I nod in complete agreement.

He softly exhales and directs his gaze, radiating the full extent of his exasperation, on them. “Are you finished with your worthless skit yet? What are you after? You said something about Elle’s heart...”

Regulus stops stretching and drops into a fighting stance facing Julius. “It’s none of your business, Julius. After all, you are going to die by my steel fists today!”

“You think you’re strong enough to kill me?”

Regulus flashes a confident smile. “I surrendered the spot of strongest Grand Magi when you showed up, but I only ceded to you because of your bag of useful magic tricks. I’ll never lose to you in battle!”

Regulus expels the air in his lungs with an explosive pop, and his muscles swell like a balloon. His clothes tear off him.

“Blech! Now even Regulus is half-naked! Why do our side’s commanders have to show so much skin? Let me make it clear that I am absolutely not joining you exhibitionists in removing my clothing,” Clark states, distancing himself from the other two Grand Magi. “Also, I’m not a fighter, so I’m just going to enjoy observing the fight from the sidelines. I will run away if you guys come close to losing.”

“I never expected anything much of you anyway,” Sereniel throws back, pushing her long flaxen tresses over her shoulder.

They’re ready to fight. But so are we!

“Julius! You can have Regulus! Leave Sereniel to me!” I announce in a loud voice. Julius looks like he just ate sour grapes.

Hey! Why do you look displeased with that? You must think it’s impossible for me!

I’m about to confirm how Julius feels when I hear “Master! I escorted the villagers to where we set up the barrier!” and Laurent comes running over.

“Everyone is safe, right?!” I spring on him. He nods with a big smile.

Aaah, Laurent! You really must be Laurent! You genius sorcerer, you! Genius! Genius! Laurent is a genius! No wonder you’re the man who defeats manga me!

“Good job, Laurent! I knew I could count on you!” I shout as he runs over to me.

I appoint you as one of Elle Village’s Four Grand Magi! I pat him on the back with the accolades he deserves.

He grew up to be such a good boy. He was such a snotty brat when we first met, too.

Okay, now I really can’t lose! I’ll pulverize Sereniel with my grand magic!

As I’m plotting the destruction of my old comrade, Julius flickers. And as soon as he disappears, Regulus has his fists out. I can feel the aftershock of Regulus’s wind all the way to where I ran from Julius to meet up with Laurent.

J-Julius? What just happened?! I’m a little confused until I see him reappear directly behind Regulus.

I’ve seen Julius use that unique dodge ability before! He used the same skill to avoid being blinded by me that time I snuck into the inner sanctum to uncover the Demon Lord’s identity.

What kind of cheat spell is that? It’s so cool! I also want to escape my enemy’s most powerful attack and reappear behind them as they panic, and say, “That’s my afterimage.”

As I’m envying one of Julius’s many useful spells, Regulus continues his relentless assault, slicing his fists through the air at Julius.

Julius disappears and reappears away from those attacks with an air of calm, but then his gaze flickers over to Laurent and me. "...Laurent, support Elle."

Oh! Looks like I was just given permission to take on Sereniel with Laurent as backup!

"Okay!" Laurent's down for it, too!

"Stay behind me, Laurent," I tell him and warn, "Sereniel is an expert at telepathic magic. If she can exploit any weaknesses in your mind, she will gain control of you. Avoid looking at her eyes...or her chest."

I criticized Sereniel's outfit earlier, but she's dressed that way for a reason. The less clothes she has on, the easier it is for her to bewitch men.

"I won't," he responds, which is just what I wanted to hear.

I have to do whatever it takes to keep her attention off Laurent. Because in the manga, Sereniel defeats him.

Sereniel's telepathy can work on someone with strong magic resistance by taking advantage of the weaknesses and darkness hidden in their heart. The painful experience of returning to his village after it was wiped out by the plague casts a dark shadow on manga Laurent, giving his character a dark undertone he doesn't have now. Sereniel infiltrates his mind through that darkness and hijacks his consciousness, getting him to temporarily betray Saint Aela and serve Sereniel instead. At the very end, when it counts the most, he regains control and sacrifices himself to protect Aela...

The Laurent I know isn't a gloomy kid, but knowing that scenario, I don't want him to fight Sereniel. I step forward and stand akimbo in front of her, blocking her path to him.

An amused smile turns up her painted lips when our eyes meet. "How sweet. Elle is going to play with me. Will you be able to entertain me?"

"Sereniel! You committed a grave sin obliterating half my precious village! I'll make you regret coming here and underestimating me!"

"Regret, eh? Why don't you be a good little girl and return to the Demon Lord before you have nothing but regret? Foolish little Elle. Julius tricked you, didn't

he? I wouldn't have guessed he was your type. Well, I have a thing for strong men, too. And his face is right up my alley. But you should know he's the kind of man who completely ignored my breasts when I shoved them in his face. His type doesn't go for women. Move on, Elle."

"J-Julius isn't gay! ...I think! And besides, the one doing all the trickery is the Demon Lord!" I assert and activate my favorite explosive magic circle in the sky.

Inferno Prison is a spell packing a tremendous amount of magic capable of locking everything beneath the circle in a sea of flames. I'll trap Regulus and Glasses while I'm at it. Although it doesn't ignite the captives, it's a cruel restraint spell that encloses the victims in flames and makes them struggle for air as their lungs collapse and their skin burns. I feel bad for Sereniel, but I'm dealing with members of the Four Grand Magi. No holds barred.

Taste the resentment of the half-destroyed Elle Village!

But for some reason Sereniel is smiling at the massive magic circle unfurling in the sky, a circle that should bring her nothing but despair.

Where does that confidence come from?

"Your attacks are as crude as ever, Elle. But are you sure you want to use such a *large* spell? Not afraid to burn up what matters to you in the process?" she coos.

"Some hot gales will whip through the area, but Julius, Laurent, and I can handle ourselves!"

"Good for you. But can you say the same for them?" Sereniel purrs, flicking her gaze suggestively in another direction.

I follow her gaze and see lots of people...? Ah! Isn't that Jasper and the rest? Jasper the Trembler is leading the villagers to us.

"Wh-Why?! What are you all doing?!" Laurent cries when he sees the villagers staggering toward us. "Return to the evacuation area! It's dangerous here!" he pleads, but his voice doesn't reach them as they amble slowly in this direction like zombies.

The way they're acting has to be the work of Sereniel's Bewitch...! Bewitch

can temporarily take over the mind of the person it has been cast on. Complex commands don't work well, but it's possible to make them obey basic orders.

Magic users like Laurent and I have a high resistance to spells, but normal people without any magic are highly susceptible to it. Right now the villagers are only under the influence of Bewitch, but if she casts another spell to completely take over their minds, they will happily obey the order to kill themselves.

I disengage the Inferno Prison. How could I not? My grand spell will absolutely hurt them.

"I'm glad you're perceptive, Elle. Come now, my precious henchlings, capture foolish Elle and her friends."

Upon Sereniel's orders, the villagers rush at me with glassy eyes like they're sleepwalking.

Scary! Their zombiness is frightening!

What can I do? Summon an ice wall to block their path? No, that won't work. Jasper and the rest are like puppets without a mind of their own. They don't have the wherewithal to avoid obstacles and will ram right into the wall without minding the injuries they might get.

I don't want to hurt the people I care about!

Laurent steps between the villagers and me and begins chanting a spell.

"Laurent, don't," I stop him. "I don't want to hurt them."

"But—!"

"Please."

"If that's what you want," he quietly concedes and lets Jasper capture us without resisting.

I'm sorry, Laurent. I swear I will save you and the others. I glare at Sereniel for forcing me into this dilemma.

"So Laurent's defenses weren't enough to protect them after all... Your telepathic magic is still a cut above the rest."

I hear Julius's levelheaded voice.

How? I thought he was fighting Regulus?! I look over and find Regulus on his knees at Julius's feet.

Seriously?! It's over already?! That was fast! I know Julius is the strongest of the Four Grand Magi, but couldn't Regulus have tried a little harder?!

"Regulus, you dolt! How could you let yourself be beaten so fast?!" Sereniel complains, in just as much shock as me.

Regulus lifts his head. "Yecho. I give, I give. Julius moves around like a whippersnapper and I accidentally twisted my ankle tryin' to catch up. I haven't fought like that in a long time, so my lower back gave out..."

He looks a lot older to me when he says that...

"Oh my Demon Lord! You're utterly useless! Not that it matters. I've already got Elle. I can do this on my own," Sereniel snips and looks Julius over. "Don't get any funny ideas, Julius. You're smart enough to see who has the upper hand. I have hostages. You care about these country bumpkin Gaeans, right? They're my pets now. They'll dance to whatever tune I play." She sneers with cherry red lips.

"You seem to be acting under a misconception, Sereniel. You think these Gaeans mean something to me?"

I'm startled to hear him say that to her with such a coldhearted gleam in his eyes.

"H-Hey! Where did that come from, Julius?! I won't let you off the hook if you hurt Canna and the others!"

Julius glares at Sereniel without responding to my shouts.

Ignored! Julius just ignored me!

"I see. You've always been that kind of man, Julius... What's your game that you felt the need to drag Elle into this with you?" Sereniel asks, panic edging into her voice.

"My game? I have none, but being hunted by the Demon Lord is a nuisance. I'll spare your lives if you forget you ever saw me here." Julius flashes an

indomitable smile.

What the heck?! What's gotten into you, Julius?! That's totally a line from the villain playbook!

"Lady Elle, Master Julius has a plan," Laurent whispers to me.

What? A plan? When I wonder what that is, the hands holding me in place loosen their grip.

I activate Analyze in my right eye and watch as various magic circles appear and disappear around the villagers. Could this be a spell to deactivate Sereniel's Bewitch? There are too many circles flickering in and out of view to distinguish their code, but it seems like Julius is trying to regain control of the villagers from Sereniel.

Ugh! The circles are changing too fast for me to parse!

Sereniel is too focused on Julius to notice.

The twinkle of a sound mind begins to return to the villagers' empty eyes.

"Wha...? Where am I? Lady Elle?"

"Jasper! You're back!"

The rest of the villagers recover in the same way. Sereniel's beautiful face scrunches in a grand scowl when she notices a little too late that everyone has regained consciousness.

"H-How did that happen?! I can't believe it. My Bewitch was deactivated? When did you do that...?!" Sereniel roars with a start.

When did he do it? In the few moments since Mr. Strongest Grand Magi has been chatting with you, that's when. There's too great a strength gap between Julius and the other Grand Magi.

The undeniable top dog of the Four Grand Magi lifts his lips in a goading smirk.

"Don't think you're the only one capable of using telepathic spells, Sereniel."

"Grr...Julius!" Knocked off guard by an unexpected counterattack in her own specialty, Sereniel stares down Julius, her face redder than her cherry lips.

“Laurent, gather Elle and the villagers in a circle and create a powerful barrier around them that will block out telepathic spells. Copy the exact same circle as the ones I just used. You’re up to the challenge, yeah?” Julius tells Laurent, who had stepped out to protect the villagers.

Julius makes it sound easy, but how does he expect Laurent to copy the circles he had appearing and vanishing every few seconds? There’s no way a novice sorcerer like Laurent can pull off a barrier like that! Silly Julius! It’s not nice to assume other people can do something just because you can!

Laurent promptly nods, despite my misgivings, and replies, “You’ve got it, Master Julius!” He chants the spell, activating the circle in the sky above us.

Right. I forgot. Laurent is a genius...

In a matter of seconds, he creates a barrier and leads me and the villagers into it. Then he continues chanting to strengthen the barrier.

I-Is it just me or am I the only one not doing anything useful? It’s all because Julius’s powers are too much of a cheat... He doesn’t even spare an ounce of mercy for his former allies.

I kinda feel like I should side with the other Grand Magi because they were defeated so easily; they need someone else to even the odds.

Julius is managing this bad situation with his quick thinking. He ruthlessly captures Glasses before he can sneak away and deploys a gravity spell that brings the three idiot Grand Magi who dared invade Elle Village to their hands and knees.

“So who wants to tell me how you located this village first?” Julius looks down his nose at his former allies crushed against the ground.

“Didn’t you ever learn to respect your elders?” Regulus painfully hisses through his teeth with his forehead pressed into the dirt.

“Oh? Are you going to teach me about respect, elder?” Julius says drolly as another pained moan rips from Regulus’s throat.

He probably increased the weight bearing down on them. I hear cracks and pops coming from Regulus. No mercy. Julius shows no mercy. He doesn’t spare

even an inkling of leniency for the people he used to fight alongside!

But they deserve it. After all, these bothersome Three Grand Magi committed the grave sin of obliterating half of my precious Elle Village!

“Ahhh. Don’t put any more pressure on us! That guy in the glasses called Clark discovered your location! Regulus and I don’t know anything about it!” Sereniel confesses, at the end of her rope.

“Hey! Sereniel! It’s horrible to sell out your colleagues!” wails the four-eyed weakling.

Sounds like Glasses here is the culprit. Julius’s icicle-sharp gaze stabs into Clark.

“I see. You’re the one? How did you pinpoint this location?”

“Eek...! I didn’t do anything...special...,” Clark blurts out in a feverish haste.

In the manga, Clark’s magic skill set was making homunculi and controlling them.

Homunculi... What if Glasses is just as skilled fighting with homunculi as his manga counterpart? Is there one hiding somewhere nearby?

I survey the area, hoping to disprove that theory. I don’t see any especially suspicious shadows...

Or so I think, until I notice a shift in magical energy out of the corner of my eye. That’s the exact direction that would be a blind spot for Julius! I break into a run.

“Julius, move!”

I jump in front of Julius and thrust out my right hand to protect him from the ball of magic propelling toward him at earth-shattering speed. Between my fingers I glimpse what looks like a tiny person encased in magic zooming at us like a fiery bullet.

Without much of an incantation, I unleash a massive amount of magic from my hand to stop the mysterious blazing humanoid before it can attack. My magic and the living bullet clash, creating an intense burst of light that I squeeze my eyes against.

Magic pressure explodes like a bomb blast, and something squeals.

My hair is yanked back by the hot wind and I'm almost blown away, but I plant my feet and endure the pressure. The roaring winds are too loud to hear anyone.

But I'll stave off this attack! After all, I was once one of the Four Grand Magi who could silence the crying winds!

I keep my arm out with a constant flow of magic until I sense whatever was charging us disintegrate. I stop emitting magic.

A strong wind ravages the area for a brief moment, immediately followed by absolute silence.

I slowly open my eyes, afraid of what I'll see. The ground directly in front of me has caved in, and the forest area beyond has been scorched worse than if a forest fire had burned through.

I look down as I catch my breath. Some black lump is curled up on the sunken earth. It looks like the magic light ball that was gunning for us.

I did it! I stopped it! You're amazing, me! That's why you're Elle!

I'm celebrating my success when my stretched out hand flops against my side. I drop my gaze to it and gasp.

Lacerations cover my right arm, blood is seeping everywhere like a water balloon with a hole in it, and a portion has been seared right off. Did I fail to fully block that attack? Or was I incapable of withstanding my own magic? I don't know.

I don't know which it was, but...

"Holy crap that hurts...", I unconsciously mutter as tears prick at my eyes.

I mean, it hurts. Hella bad. I'm bleeding. A lot. And my skin has turned black! It hurts, it hurts so much, but if I break down crying here, it'll ruin my super cool moment saving Julius from danger!

"Elle!!!"

I hear Julius's panic-stricken voice behind me as I'm trying not to cry. He walks

around until he's in front of me and looks at my mutilated arm. His cool-blue eyes waver with unspeakable distress.

"E-Elle...your arm...blood..." he stammers in a threadbare voice, looking like he's in more pain than me. His cheeks are ashen.

Somehow, seeing someone else panicking more has helped ground me in reality and fight back the pain-induced tears.

"I-It doesn't hurt that bad! I'm just glad you're okay, Julius!" I bluff and manage to hold my head high.

It really doesn't...hurt at all. This little injury will heal with the DemiOracle's elixir. Oh, right, I used it up when I was persuading Laurent's village to join us. Julius said he doesn't have any potions, either...

Wait, will my arm hurt like it's burning in hell forever? I'll never be able to use it again? Tears sting the back of my eyes again.

It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt. I won't cry. It doesn't hurt. I'm an adult. Adults don't cry...!

Except repeating that desperate litany in my head does not make it true.

Julius lifts his worry-darkened eyes from my arm to my face, his expression grim. "You're just glad that I'm okay? There is not a single damn thing to be glad about when you're hurt this bad!"

Julius's furious shout stops my tears from falling.

He seems pissed for some reason! I'm too shocked for words. He grabs me by the shoulders. His tortured face is only inches from mine.

"Why don't you ever listen to me?! You let those suspicious spies pretending to be saints escape and even threw yourself into danger to protect me! You're their target, Elle!" he thunders.

"Y-You say I don't listen, but I know that Aela...that Saint Aela isn't a bad person. And don't pretend like you weren't starting to like her and Prince Guido, too! Plus, if I didn't make a move just now, you would've been in worse danger than me, Julius!"

"I don't matter!"

“O-Of course you matter! You could’ve died if I didn’t do something!” My words come out shrill and deafening because I can’t believe what he just said.

There’s no one who doesn’t matter! Julius would’ve gotten seriously injured if I let things be and that magic bullet hit him when his guard was down. It might’ve even taken his life...!

Imagining a world without Julius makes me feel like I’ve taken a knife to the chest.

I don’t want a world without him! I’d gladly offer up one or two arms in return for keeping him alive and well. Besides, this is a world of magic. We can figure out a way to heal my arm...probably.

“You fool! Why must you do such senseless things? Enough! Just sit by and let me protect you, Elle! All you have to do is listen to me! Then you will be safe! Why don’t you understand that?!”

Huh? Just sit by and let him protect me? All I have to do is listen to him? What the heck! Putting it like that is the same as saying he doesn’t need me to worry or look after him. Like my efforts are unwanted!

“What the heck! I’m not just some damsel in distress waiting around for you to save me! Being protected by you and doing whatever you say...makes me the same person I was when I foolishly entrusted everything to the Demon Lord. I’m not who I was in Analia. I am not a puppet who rejoices when someone else pulls my strings!” I lay into him with unbridled annoyance.

Julius goes wide-eyed and those pools of blue waver like a storm is brewing within. This is the first time I’ve seen him this flustered; I’m so surprised I forget my anger. And then he’s suddenly leaning on me!

Er, uh, why is he hugging me now of all times?! Also, my arm is killing me!

I think he’s doing it until all his body weight crashes down on me and I’m crushed underneath him.

This isn’t a hug. Julius lost consciousness?!

I roll him off me with my one working hand and examine his face.

Is he sleeping? He’s breathing, but his eyes are closed and he’s unresponsive.

What in the world happened?

“Ufufu! I did it! I can’t believe Mesmerize worked on Julius!” Sereniel cheers even though she was supposed to have been smushed against the ground by Julius’s gravity spell.

I look in Sereniel’s direction just as she rises to her feet, then back at Julius—his eyes are still closed and he isn’t moving.

Mesmerize? Julius was mesmerized?

I’m pretty sure Mesmerize is the spell Sereniel casts on manga Laurent. It forces the victim to sleep and shows them illusions. Losing to the illusion while asleep will turn the victim into a living puppet who obeys Sereniel.

How did Julius fall for it? Mesmerize is another mental spell that takes advantage of a person’s emotional instabilities. It’s the type of spell that rarely works on a sorcerer of Julius’s caliber. I mean, he’s the strongest Grand Magi and a confident man. Mesmerize shouldn’t have any effect on a stable mind!

When Julius went unconscious, it lifted the gravitational spell he had restraining our enemies, and now they’re all standing up.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day Julius would fall to Mesmerize! Ufufu! Lucky me. Perhaps I should thank you for arguing with him. You created a crack in his mental defenses. Thank you, Elle.” Sereniel winks at me.

Next to her, Regulus is rubbing his lower back. Clark is checking out the forest I obliterated and whistling an amused tune.

“You’ve been away from home long enough. Time to go back, Elle. I’ll apologize to the Demon Lord with you and have you reappointed as one of the Four Grand Magi.” Sereniel smiles like she’s won the day.

Interlude: Julius's Wish

I wake up and open my eyes. But even with them open, my surroundings are steeped in thick darkness. I can't see a thing. Where am I?

What was I doing...?

That's right. Hunters from Analia had shown up for us. I had them cornered and then—

"I protected Elle from Analia's wicked clutches, and now I'm going to lock away my darling Elle to keep her from ever being harmed again."

I hear a voice speak directly behind me.

"Who goes there?" I look back at nothing. There's only inky black.

"I'm you, Julius."

I hear it behind me again. But I can only see darkness over my shoulder.

I'm you? The voice does sound like mine.

Could I be trapped within Sereniel's spell...?! No. It can't be. Not me. Mesmerize only works on the mentally unstable...

What in the world happened? I would never fall victim to such a weak spell.

If I remember correctly, I fought with Sereniel's group when they showed up and then—

"I'm not just some damsel in distress waiting around for you to save me! Being protected by you and doing whatever you say...makes the same person I was when I foolishly entrusted everything to the Demon Lord. I'm not who I was in Analia. I am not a puppet who rejoices when someone else pulls my strings!"

The world spins when I remember Elle's argument.

That's it. That's what happened. Elle's words struck such a blow to me that... Sereniel's spell succeeded.

“Take my hand, Julius. Your wish will come true if you do.”

The third time I hear that same cold voice, something mimicking my appearance emerges from the dark before me. A dauntless smile curls its lips as it holds out its right hand.

“My wish?”

“That’s right. You want to make Elle all yours, no? Don’t you want to dress her up all pretty and have her waiting safely back home like an obedient doll ready to obey your every word? You just have to lock her away from the rest of the world and make her incapable of living without you. That is your wish.”

I’m astonished by the horrific desires spoken of by the thing with my shape.

“I’ve never...wished for...that. Wanting such a thing will make me the same as the...Demon Lord.” My voice trembles.

“I am not a puppet who rejoices when someone else pulls my strings!”

Elle’s woeful visage flashes before my mind’s eye.

The Demon Lord was trying to make Elle—or rather, all of Analia—a living pawn incapable of surviving without it. Elle was deeply hurt by the Demon Lord’s arrogant greed. I never want to hurt Elle again. I don’t want to become like the Demon Lord.

...But a piece of me is helplessly tempted by the illusion’s offer.

My wish is...

The other Julius sneers at me for being seduced.

“She got in the way despite how weak she is and ended up mutilating her arm. But doesn’t that work out just fine for us? All you have to do now is burn up her other arm and both legs. Doing so will render her incapable of living without you. That is your wish. Isn’t it?”

“I don’t wish for...that.”

“No, I know you do. I’m you. I understand how you work. Leave all the hard stuff to me if you don’t want to acknowledge it. Your every desire will come true while you sleep. When you wake up, Elle will be yours.”

That's not what I want...or is it? Can I be sure?

Why does it have such an alluring ring?

What's wrong with me? My mind is hazy. I'm so terribly sleepy. My wish will be granted if I give in to this sleepiness?

When I close my eyes, I see my time back in Analia.

Analia is a complacent country, much like lukewarm water.

If you listen to what the Demon Lord says, you can spend your time in peace. All you have to do is live by what the Demon Lord says and never think for yourself.

I could do the most inhuman things without thinking twice as long as it was under the pretext of serving the Demon Lord. It was ridiculously easy living without a mind of my own. Like a drone. So easy, I lost sight of myself.

I began to question the Demon Lord when I became the first-ranked Grand Magi and took command of the war.

For some reason, the Demon Lord gave the order to withdraw when we were one step away from defeating Gaea. It was then that I wondered about the Demon Lord's motives and began to question its existence. Doubts I was never supposed to have.

I snuck into the inner sanctum to disprove the misgivings clouding my decisions. I believed that the awe-inspiring figure I had sworn allegiance to would be there and that he would surely wash away all the trivial doubts I was starting to have.

But the Demon Lord I envisioned was not there. The Demon Lord was just a magic circle.

All the people throughout Analia had lived for nothing more than a magic circle.

I was stunned by the unexpected truth but quickly returned to my usual self.

Even without a Demon Lord, the magic circle would continue to tell me what to do as the Demon Lord I worshiped. So life would go on without change.

That's what I told myself. I stopped thinking and put a lid on the truth without facing the fact that I had been betrayed by the thing I had believed in my whole life.

I was lazy and a coward.

And then I met Elle.

She brought up the Demon Lord briefly during our first meeting. Her tormented expression instantly told me that she harbored doubts about the Demon Lord.

She might sneak into the inner sanctum like I did. How will she react once she learns the truth about the Demon Lord? Will she refuse to think about it like I did? Those thoughts plagued me.

Elle wept when she learned the truth. She experienced sadness, anger, and loss, and she cried over the knowledge that the Demon Lord she believed in didn't exist. When I saw her tears, I realized for the first time that I was anguished, too. I was afraid to face the truth; I refused to be sad. Weeping, grieving, and being at a loss were for weaklings, and so I rejected my emotions.

But I was wrong. Elle was the strong one for accepting those sorrowful emotions, crying, and moving on. I just ran away.

That's right. Elle is strong. Far stronger than I will ever be. She has the strength to face herself and to care for others.

I was attracted to her because of that.

So is it really my desire to take away her freedom, clip her wings, and lock her up just so I'll have peace of mind that she's safe?

Is the illusion right, and I actually wish to put her in a situation where I'm the only crutch she can lean on?

It's not.

It never was.

I have never wished for such a sick thing.

I wrench open my eyes in opposition to the drowsiness stealing my

consciousness.

“I love the girl who loves freedom,” I announce to the darkness reflecting my image. “I desire nothing more than to protect her innocent smile. I love her precious spirit that honestly shares what she feels without a filter. I’ve always wanted to become someone near and dear to her... So I don’t wish for what you offer!” I answer, confirming my own feelings along the way.

My illusion painfully falls to its knees and slowly fades. And then the darkness distorts. I can see the light. The exit from Sereniel’s spell.

I have to wake up. And make my way to Elle.



“MASTER Julius?! Did you come to?!”

When I open my heavy eyelids, Laurent is right in front of me. Seeing the look on his stark-white face fills me with dread. I jerk upright and grab him by the shoulder.

“Elle?! Where’s Elle?!”

“I’m sorry! I couldn’t protect her! Those thugs from Analia made off with her...!”

I comb my gaze over the surrounding area and find neither Elle nor the Three Grand Magi who attacked us.

Bloody hell!

“I am so sorry. It is all our fault, Lord Julius. Lady Elle held a knife to her own heart and went with them on the condition that they don’t harm this village... She took her heart hostage to save us because we are too weak to save ourselves...” Jasper falls to his knees crying.

She did that because their target is her heart...

“...Laurent, did they return by the same teleportation circle they used to get here?”

“Yes. They left through the same exact one...,” Laurent replies, remorsefully gnawing on his bottom lip.

I place a hand on his other shoulder.

“Then we can still make it,” I tell him and stand.

Act 4: Elle's Heart

Chapter 9: Captured Elle

“OH my Demon Lord! Care to explain what’s going on, Clark?!” Sereniel screeches in a high-pitched voice beside me.

She’s throwing a hissy fit, but I can understand why.

I thought the Grand Magi were going to cart me back to Analia through the teleportation circle, but we ended up teleporting to a plain old forest in the middle of nowhere. Analia is nowhere in sight. Actually, I kinda recognize this place.

Isn’t this the forest near Elle Village?

“I’ve been had. The teleportation circle I made was altered at some point. These traces of magic belong to Julius. He truly is a man of many skills. He’s not the best of the Four Grand Magi for nothing. I have to redo the entire magic circle now...” Glasses sighs.

You rule, Julius! When did he get the chance to rework their teleportation circle? He’s always several steps ahead of the enemy. Just what I’d expect of a resident of Elle Village.

“That whippersnapper is incontestably useful,” Regulus says in praise of Julius. “He can do anything. He is, after all, the man I acknowledged as the top of the Four Grand Magi.”

“Excuse me, bag of bones, can you stop lazily glorifying the enemy and give me a hand reworking the teleportation circle?” The weakling research nerd shoves up his glasses and looks at Regulus.

“You can’t mean me?!”

“Who else is there?” Clark provokes.

Regulus scrunches up his face, unable to hide his surprise at Clark’s goading, but he ambles over to the magic circle and assists anyway. He probably can’t

come up with a good retort. I feel like I just witnessed the sad moment when their roles in the pecking order reversed.

Well, that's their problem. Even if they work together to redo the teleportation circle, it will still take them time to complete it.

I wonder if I can escape in the meanwhile...

I look down at the glowing silver chain wrapped around my neck. This collar prevents sorcerers from using magic.

The magic essential to my escape has been sealed off. My magic is corked. Without it, I'm nothing more than a beautiful girl!

And my right arm burns! I'm still paying dearly for stopping that mysterious ball of light with the magic I released from my right hand. It aches big-time. At least Sereniel wrapped my arm in a clean white cloth and did some basic first aid on it.

"Come on now, Elle. Remove that dangerous knife from your heart already," Sereniel cajoles, glancing away from the other two working on the magic circle to briefly look at me.

She's my prison guard. I tighten my grasp on the knife with my uninjured left hand.

When they first showed up, Clark said not to damage my heart, so I made them vow not to harm Elle Village by threatening the one thing they placed value on. Honestly, it was a dangerous gamble. But the Three Grand Magi accepted my demands.

My heart is that important to them. What is it about my heart that they want it this badly?

"Hmph! Flattery works on puppets and fools, and that's not who I am!" I say, outright rejecting her.

"Hmm. You've changed. I can't believe you would go so far for mere Gaeans. You even sacrificed your arm."

I drop my gaze to my bandaged right arm. Blood is seeping through the white cloth.

“They aren’t just mere Gaeans. They’re all residents of Elle Village and that makes them special. Even Julius—”

“Special? I can’t believe my ears. You, the girl who devoted her every breath to the Demon Lord, have found something more special than him? Leaving that aside, your arm looks like it must hurt a lot. We have to get back to Analia soon and get some of the DemiOracle’s healing elixir into you,” Sereniel says, staring at my arm with genuine worry.

She’s been acting oddly nice to me. It’s throwing me off.

When I was in Analia, she often sought me out and picked on me. It’s incredibly rare for anyone to care about other people in Analia, where the Demon Lord is number one and human relationships are shallow.

But even in the manga, Sereniel was the only Grand Magi who cared about Elle.

When she hears about manga Elle’s death, she says, “It seems like stupid little Elle was killed.” But then she hunts down Saint Aela’s group with quiet rage simmering beneath the cold smile she said those words with.

Sereniel is also the one who casts Bewitch and Mesmerize on Laurent, the main culprit responsible for killing Elle, and kills him once she’s done with him.

“Sorry, bag of bones, I’m done rewriting that part of the magic circle. It’s now complete.”

I overhear Clark, the weakling in glasses, announce the circle’s completion while I’m busy thinking about Sereniel.

Seriously?! He already finished overwriting the teleportation circle?! Isn’t that too fast?!

“Take another look, Clark. It’s not done yet. Only one person can return to Analia with this configuration,” Regulus points out.

Clark nods as if Regulus had noted something as obvious as the sky being blue.

“We don’t have to teleport as a group. It works just as well with me returning to Analia with Elle. Please create your own teleportation circle and return after

me.”

Regulus takes that order with a dissatisfied frown. Sereniel rises from where she sat elegantly perched on a stump.

“Even then, you need to add another circle to bring Elle with you, Clark. So why is it that your circle is only configured to teleport one person?” she asks, her voice pointed.

Clark smirks. “It works fine this way. With room for just one. It only needs to teleport the one person carrying Elle’s heart, after all.”

All it has to do is teleport the person carrying my heart? Does that mean what I think it does?!

My pulse pounds in my ears.

In other words, he plans to kill me and teleport away with just my heart?

I strengthen my grip on the knife.

I have no idea what it’s going to be used for, but it can’t be anything good!

“Y-You should know that the moment you try anything funny, I’m going to sink this knife straight into my heart and make it go kersplat!” I sputter in a panic. But threatening to thrust a knife into my heart if they try to kill me will still end with me dead...

I’m sickened by my own ultimatum, when Sereniel steps between me and Clark.

“I won’t let you. Elle pulled a stupid stunt, but I’m going to make her apologize to the Demon Lord and have her return to her former position as a Grand Magi.”

She’s sticking up for me!

Glasses scowls at Sereniel for hiding me behind her.

Tension electrifies the air among the Three Grand Magi.

“Was that a part of the Demon Lord’s orders?” Clark counters, his brows raised with disgust. “The Demon Lord ordered us to return with Elle’s heart unscathed. In other words, there’s no requirement to keep her alive as long as

we obtain her heart in perfect condition.”

“...But he also didn’t order her death. I’ll put in a good word for her as one who has served as the second-ranked Grand Magi for years. The Demon Lord will forgive her,” Sereniel insists.

Clark’s beady eyes round behind his glasses. Then he brings his right hand to his lips and tilts down his head, shoulders trembling.

“Pft...puahaha...!” Restrained laughter forces itself past his pressed lips and explodes into roaring laughter: “Hahahaha!” Clark pulls off his glasses and swipes away the tears.

“Ha! Dang it, I can’t stop laughing. You’re too hilarious! How do you manage to continue spouting such nonsense, Sereniel? Hahaha! The Four Grand Magi should be called the Four Grand Idiots!” Clark sniggers and breaks down into maniacal laughter.

Dumbstruck, I gape at him.

What’s with this mad scientist? He’s creepy. Which reminds me, his manga version was the same way. He’ll do whatever it takes to accomplish his goals... The kind of villain who likes to laugh with “Mwahaha!”

“Stop that annoying laughter before I cut out your vocal cords!” Sereniel threatens.

Clark stops laughing and looks at me. Not at Sereniel, but me.

“You still haven’t figured out the Demon Lord’s sublime intentions yet? Even if you bring Elle back alive, she will just be killed on the spot and have her heart ripped out anyway! After all, the only thing needed is her heart that pumps an infinite supply of magic!”

“An infinite supply of magic...?” Sereniel echoes and looks back at me.

I think back on what Julius told me. He called my inexhaustible supply of magic a perpetual magic generator and warned that I’d be dragged back to Analia if the Demon Lord discovered my condition.

And it was pretty much a given that the Demon Lord already knew about my unique constitution. I mean, I conducted weird experiments on myself under

the Demon Lord's orders.

The one job assigned to me since becoming the fourth-ranked Grand Magi in charge of the Centers for Magic Research was simply to keep using magic. To conduct experiments focused solely on a constant expulsion of my magic.

So those experiments were all about trying to confirm whether my heart is a perpetual magic generator.

Ha! The Demon Lord never did love me. Not even a little. I was nothing more than a guinea pig. Of course that'd be the case. Because the Demon Lord is nothing more than a magic circle that produces the optimal solutions for magic to take over the world.

I've known that for a while now. I knew it, grieved over it, and it still pains me.

"But man, I was trembling with excitement when I saw your power obliterate half the forest, Elle! You stopped my homunculus's suicidal attack with just the pressure of your magic. Such power hasn't even been theorized before. Elle, please offer that priceless heart of yours up to the Demon Lord without a fight," Clark urges, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses.

I can't decipher his expression, and it scares me into retreating a step.

"...What does the Demon Lord plan to do with Elle's heart?" Sereniel asks in a tight voice.

Clark's crooked lips pull back in a twisted grin. "Getting one's hands on an infinite supply of magic and the unique power hidden within the Demon Lord's bloodline will allow one to trigger a magic miracle thought to be absolutely impossible."

"A magic miracle said to be absolutely impossible...?" Sereniel repeats.

"All right, I've explained enough. That's what the Demon Lord is after, so having just her heart fulfills the mission. Please gouge out Elle's heart, Sereniel. Cleanly."

Sereniel's shoulders jerk back. Then she slowly turns toward me. She looks straight at me and our eyes meet.

Oh no. I have to run away.

I don't wanna die. I especially don't want my heart to be used in some freaky ritual after I'm dead...!

Chills coil around my spine as I look into Sereniel's eyes. And then right after those chills scrape through my body, I'm enveloped in a different unpleasantness.

I can't...move. Is this her spell?

Her fingers finish the last line of a small magic circle.

I know I have to run away, but I can't even make a sound, and Sereniel quickly closes the space between us. She lays her hand on the magic sealing collar around my neck and runs her fingers over it.

CLANG!

What? The chain inhibiting my magic hits the ground with a jangle.

My body suddenly feels lighter. Magic flows through me.

Did she just free me? I look up, baffled, and Sereniel's beautifully shaped lips part.

"Elle, run away."

"Erm...?" I let out a weird sound in response to the last thing I expected to hear.

But Sereniel turns her back on me without explanation.

"The Demon Lord's intentions and a heart capable of producing an endless supply of magic? You don't make much sense, Clark, but I get the picture... However, if killing Elle is the goal, then I won't let her go back to Analia," she announces in a firm voice as she spreads her arms to protect me.

Wh-Why is she going that far for me?!



“Sereniel, wh-why?!” I can’t help but ask. She says nothing.

“I see. You were among those I needed to count as a mindless fool. How unfortunate,” Clark drawls, annoyance puckering his forehead.

“Don’t pout because a pretty lady wasn’t willing to play along with you, boy.”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to call yourself pretty? Then again, you are a slut who wantonly struts around in that outfit, so you mustn’t have any sense of shame. Regulus, remove this indecent woman and bring me Elle’s heart. I don’t do the whole fighting thing. I’ll leave it to the old bones,” Clark says, directing his demands to Regulus this time.

Regulus stops silently watching over the situation with folded arms and moves forward. Sereniel withdraws a step.

No matter how I pair them up, Sereniel and Regulus are a bad match. Sereniel is more of a bewitcher than a direct fighter; she doesn’t stand a chance against Regulus, who boasts of raw fighting strength.

...All right, looks like this is where I need to intervene.

“Sereniel, move! I’ll take him on! I can use magic now, thanks to you!” I say to her back as she stands protectively in front of me. She doesn’t look at me.

“Run away! Your crude magic is a bad match for Regulus! And you’ve lost too much blood. Go as far west as your feet can take you while I buy time.”

“I can’t leave—”

As I’m arguing with Sereniel, Regulus shifts his hard gaze away from us and steps between a smugly smiling Clark and Sereniel. Then he pulls back his muscular arm—

“...Ghh!” Clark sputters painfully through gritted teeth.

What the? Regulus grabbed Clark by the neck and lifted him off the ground!

“Did you see the...Demon Lord? Did you learn about that...magic circle?” Regulus asks Clark with a tremble in his soft yet deadly voice.

Regulus knew about the Demon Lord, too?

Clark waggles his eyebrows as if to mock him. And then he sneers. “Ooh?

Could it be you know about the Demon Lord as well, old bag of bones? I shouldn't be surprised. You are that piece of art's guard dog, huh?" Clark's reply is nonchalant, even though he should be in too much pain to even speak with Regulus's fingers digging into his throat.

"What magic circle...?" I hear Sereniel mutter, confusion lacing her tone.

She seems unaware of the truth, but judging by their conversation, Clark and Regulus know that the Demon Lord...is actually just a magic circle.

"But why does it seek Elle's heart? What is the Demon Lord planning to do with it...?" Regulus asks, his expression far more pained than that of the man hanging by his squeezed throat.

"Will you release me if I tell you?" Clark negotiates in a breezy voice.

In a moment of hesitation, Regulus casts down his gaze. "...I don't know if I will until I hear you out."

"Haah," Clark sighs. "What kind of an answer is that? You're a real pain, you know that? But whatever. It's not like I have anything to hide. I can tell you if I have to," he says, like it's a real nuisance, which is so bizarre I'm getting the creeps.

Why? Because he's the one being held in the air by his throat, and yet he's the calmest person here. It's uncanny. He exhales as if he'd rather not talk but will to get this over with.

"Fine. I'll tell you," he concedes. "The Demon Lord's objective is to use Elle's heart and the power coursing through his unique bloodline to resurrect his old body. You heard that right. His objective is the Resurrection spell! He is trying to pull off a miracle no one has succeeded at before. And what an incredible miracle it shall be. So please don't interfere. Please adhere to your doglike loyalty to the Demon Lord and fetch Elle's heart for his grand scheme, sack of bones."

Regulus's eyes widen.

I'm also rendered speechless. I mean, he's talking about resurrecting the Demon Lord! How can that be?!

“What are you talking about?! Reviving the Demon Lord? How does that work? It’s not possible! The Demon Lord doesn’t exist! I saw for myself. It’s just a magic circle! Just a damn magic circle guiding our kingdom toward being ruled by magic!” I shout in the heat of the moment.

Amused, Clark looks at me. “Hahaha! I knew it! You saw the Demon Lord’s magic circle, too. Is that why you fled? What a fool! I’d gladly rip out my own heart and put it on a silver platter if it meant being a part of this miraculous spell!” He throws back his head and laughs to the high heavens.

What the heck? He’s nuts.

“The Demon Lord will revive,” he announces while I’m too shocked by his insanity to speak. “He is just a magic circle right now. But please use your head for a minute. The existence of that mind-boggling magic circle means that at one point in time there existed a genius capable of creating it! That genius is the true Demon Lord. He established Analia in order to set up all the preconditions to bring him back to life at a later time!

“Isn’t it marvelous?” Clark exclaims. “He created a magic circle that would build the foundation of his ideal world, and then he established the Kingdom of Analia with everything prepped for him to resurrect and become the god of that new world! His plans are just too supreme; it makes me go crazy just thinking about it!” Clark’s lips twist in a deranged smile despite Regulus’s nails creating crescent moons in his throat.

He was crazy before he learned about this!

“Wh-Why are you so thrilled? If the Demon Lord is the person who came up with that demented magic circle, then they’ve gotta be a lunatic! I mean, how could they be anything but deranged when they view people as nothing more than tools to further the development of magic?!” I argue, clenching my one good fist. “They think of people as puppets! What will happen if that psychopath comes back to life? Are you happy with a world controlled by magic...by the nutjob who drew that magic circle?!”

“A world controlled by magic? Haha! Who cares? You see, I’ve never felt more thrilled and alive! We’re talking human resurrection here! This is on a whole different scale from my homunculi! I will be more than satisfied if I can witness

the moment that miracle spell is used. The world can be damned afterward for all I care,” Clark declares, lunacy gleaming in his beady eyes.

The world can be damned for all he cares? He seems so inhuman for saying that, I can’t even begin to come up with a reply. I doubt I can hold a solid conversation with this creature called Clark.

I’m dumbfounded, and it’s in that moment that Regulus sighs, his hand still firmly clasped around Clark’s neck.

“...Clark, you’re missing a few dozen screws. I hate to break it to you, but even I’m not missing that many yet. I’ve been in the Demon Lord’s service all this time, but...it’s high time for me to defect from Analia. After killing you,” Regulus says, his eyes having been opened to Clark’s insanity.

I watch as a magic circle forms in his free hand. He probably plans to slam that fist into Clark and kill him.

Clark’s brows snap together the second he catches on.

“The Four Grand Magi are a gathering of good-for-nothings. Thank you for making that clear,” Clark says as something that looks like a fairy flies out from underneath his robe and latches on to Regulus’s shoulder.

I’ve seen that thing before...! I’m positive it’s the glowing ball that charged Julius in Elle Village. I bet it’s one of Clark’s homunculi!

“Regulus! You’re in danger!” I yell at the exact same time the fairy-shaped homunculus bursts into a blinding light. I instinctively slam my eyes shut against the intense glow as it burns up its fleeting life in a suicidal attack.

Then comes the roar of an explosion.

The ringing stops. I hood my eyes against the blast and look to where Regulus is on his knees and missing an arm.

“REGULUS!” Sereniel’s heartbreaking shriek cracks the air.

“Aaah. Please quit with all the violence. I’m not cut out for the front lines. Now that makes the third homunculus I lost today,” Clark complains, standing there with a wicked glint in his eyes shadowed behind shattered glasses and a superficial smile on his split lips.

The explosion seared his skin, and half his face is swollen red. And still he smiles. There's something dreadful and creepy about him...

"Lylish...?"

Out of nowhere comes a crystal-clear voice that could belong to the angels themselves and belongs here just as much as an angel would.

I look toward the thicket. A girl with hair blacker than night stumbles forward.

Aela... Why is she here? I thought I helped her escape from Elle Village already! Can we really be so unlucky to run into each other again in this forest close to the village?

I'm baffled by this sudden third party coming on to the scene, and it doesn't help that it's Aela of all people, but my gaze swivels over to Clark anyway.

Is this just as unexpected for him? The confidence has slipped from his face as he stares at Aela.

Clark has lost his nerve?

This is my chance. A chance to blow him up with an explosion. The area of effect might include Sereniel, Regulus, and even Aela, but they're strong, and I'm more afraid of falling victim to Clark's pacing.

I use my one good hand to form the spell symbols and build a prison of flame around Clark. But then I start seeing double. And nausea roils in my gut.

Ugh. This is that. Anemia. I lost too much blood.

I lurch forward a step and sway on my feet. CRUD! I'm gonna pass out. Everything is spinning, but I have to at least land one hit on Clark!

Agh! I can't...control it... The flames are...

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the fire I was summoning vanish into a puff of smoke.

Why? Why...now of all times?! My body is tilting forward and gravity is pulling me down, when someone gently catches me. Cold air rushes in and fills the forest.

I use what little strength I have to lift my head and see as ice encases Clark's

feet. His overconfident, smug smile freezes on his blue face. White quietly creeps up his body, sucking the color from his skin.

It's mist.

Hope fills me with the sudden chill licking at my skin, and I lift my eyes to the person holding me up.

"J-Julius...!"

"Elle, I'm sorry I'm late," Julius says, supporting me in his arms as he tears into Clark with his glacial blue gaze.

It's Julius! Did he break Sereniel's magic and then come straight here for me?

"Julius...don't...get in my way," Clark demands in a weakening voice, drawing my attention back to him. An uncanny smile is plastered on his sickly white face as his lower half turns to ice.

"You saw the Demon Lord's magic circle, didn't you? Someone of your caliber should be aware of its magnitude, then. All you have to do is obediently offer up Elle's heart to glimpse the Demon Lord's breathtaking power. As one who loves magic, you must understand how I feel, no? We are magic investigators. Don't you want to uncover the unknown?" Clark asks in a trembling voice. Probably a physiological tremor due to the cold. Ice has already frozen his lower half, just past his waist.

"Don't treat me like we share the same sentiment," Julius coldly shoots back.

Clark's expression freezes. But the right corner of his lip barely lifts in an eerie smile. "Haha. Too bad. It really is too bad...", he breathes out just as the ice creeps over his face and his entire body is frozen solid.

Julius lightly pokes ice-sculpture Clark, and he and the block of ice encasing him shatter.

"D-Did Clark die?"

I have to ask because this is my first time in this life—and in my last life, too—ever witnessing the moment someone has died, as I've never been on the battlefield before.

"No. That thing wasn't human. I assume what I destroyed is a homunculus he

made. The real person is likely comfortably sitting back at the Demon Lord's castle."

WHAT?! We were talking to a homunculus all this time?!

"In any case, Elle, you are in no position to worry about others. You are losing so much blood."

I lift my head at the nearness of Julius's voice. His handsome face is right before my eyes. Worry colors his features as he assesses my arm, and it's making me feel oddly embarrassed.

"I-I-It's n-n-not that big of a—" *D-Deal!* I tried to say, but another wave of dizziness strikes first. I can't feel my legs, and I'm pretty much only standing because of Julius's arms around my waist.

Oh no. I can't...muster any strength.

"Um, I can heal your injured arm if you like?"

I hear a timid voice offer assistance while I'm thinking I've only got about five more seconds before the spinning world blacks out and I lose consciousness. I jerk my eyes to Aela's concerned face.

Oh yeah, Aela can heal me. Or rather, she's the only person who can help me now. If things go well, even the burns on my arm will be cleanly repaired.

"Please...do," I request, leaning against Julius.

Aela smiles and steps toward me. And I retreat a full step backward. Actually, I was dragged back a step. BY JULIUS!

Why are you withdrawing from her? Weak, I look up at Julius, the question in my eyes.

"I can't trust someone whose objectives are unclear," he says.

So he's not willing to let her help me because he doesn't trust her yet. I totally get why he doubts her. But I want her to heal my arm if it can be done!

Sheer willpower is helping me anchor my consciousness, but that's a feat only possible because I used to be one of the Four Grand Magi. Anyone else would've blacked out from the pain by now. I've been doing my best to stay

a float in spite of the agonizing pain and lack of blood, because I'm Elle!

I muster a modicum of strength to grab a fistful of Julius's shirt and pull it to me. "Julius...it's...okay. Aela is a good...girl," I insist between short breaths. Skepticism plows his brow.

There's no way for him to know that, because he doesn't have the same knowledge of the manga that I do, and I don't have the leisure of explaining why she's good to him right now.

I'm seriously at my breaking point! I'm in pure agony! I use that agony as the last push to stagger a step closer to Aela. Julius hesitates when he sees my stubborn move, but he assists me closer to her rather than stop me.

"That's a horrible injury. I know it must hurt, but you can relax now. I will heal you right up. All you have to do is lift your head," Aela instructs, sympathizing with my pain as she looks at my disfigured arm.

When I lift my head, Aela's pretty face is there, and she knocks her forehead against mine. I immediately feel the blood circulate through my body, and warmth spreads to my cold, throbbing arm.

So this is the power of Aela's healing magic!

I give myself over to the comforting warmth for a few moments until I feel it fade away. Aela has stopped pressing her forehead against mine. I kind of wish we could stay that way a little longer. And then I remember my bandaged arm.

Ah! I'm no longer in pain! I can't believe it, so I unwrap the bandage, revealing a perfectly normal arm without a single cut or burn.

"Amazing," I utter in awe. I mean, how could I not be after witnessing this miracle?

"You healed an injury that severe in a second...," Julius murmurs, astonishment glimmering in his eyes as he focuses on her. Then he smiles so softly, so sweetly; it's an expression he never once used in Elle Village or Analia.

Julius, the Prince of Glacial Beauty, has graced Aela with a warm and tender smile...

"You have my utmost gratitude. Thank you, truly."

There's no woman who could hear those words from his beautifully smiling lips and not blush. Crimson stains Aela's white cheeks.

I can't stand seeing the two of them sharing this silent moment, so I cast my gaze to the ground and pretend to check on my healed arm by opening and closing my fist.

Wh-What if they fall in love now? It was the moment that Aela healed Julius's wounds and showed him her healing magic for the first time that he took an interest in her in the manga. Seeing her use such a rare ability attracts him to her, and that attraction eventually turns to love...

I wonder why I'm so agitated. Why does my heart feel like it's dropped from the sky? Why do I feel this way?

"P-Pardon me, I-lady, but could I impose upon you to I-look at my arm too...?" As I'm coping with my antsy feelings, I hear a voice that sounds like it's at death's door. I look over and find Regulus collapsed on the ground.

Oh yeah, I forgot about him. Regulus's arm was blown off, too.

"I-I'm sorry. I will be right there!" Aela exclaims and rushes over to him. Upon seeing his missing arm, she mutters, "This injury was caused by..." Sadness weighs her brows down at the corners.

"C-Can you heal him, too? Will he get his arm back?" Sereniel asks, worry lacing her tone as she helps Regulus stand.

Aela whips her head up from the injury with a start. "Y-Yes. I can...I think. It should...heal if I use all my remaining magic. I'm going to touch you, okay?" she says, asking for permission, and with a nod from Regulus, she places her forehead against his.

And then Regulus's arm regrows before our eyes!

Uwah! Arms grow out this way? Aela's awesome! Too awesome! Though seriously, watching the bone jut out and then be covered by muscle and skin is grotesque!

How much damage is her magic capable of repairing and regrowing? Say she had an infinite supply of magic...would it be possible to regrow an entire body?

The healing elixirs from the DemiOracle can heal a lot, but not this much— That’s it, isn’t it?

I’ve just realized something disturbing: the DemiOracle’s power and Aela’s are very similar. No, Aela’s powers are the superior version of the DemiOracle’s. I remember hearing that the emotionless puppet we call the DemiOracle is actually a homunculus made with the Demon Lord’s blood.

Clark’s words flash through my mind, filling in the puzzle pieces.

“The Demon Lord’s objective is to use Elle’s heart and the power coursing through his unique bloodline to resurrect his old body.”

Oh my gosh, why didn’t I realize it sooner? Why am I such an idiot to only figure it out now when I learned about it in the manga?

Saint Aela. Even in the manga, she was the only sorcerer in the world capable of using healing magic. That’s why people called her a saint

And manga Aela only gained her saintly powers because of Lylish. Lylish shows up from the Fairy Realm and makes Aela drink some sort of liquid under the pretense of it harboring God’s power.

I’m in shock over the theory I’ve drawn up after witnessing Aela’s power firsthand.

Then the thicket ahead of us moves.

“Aela! What are you doing here?! I thought I made it clear that I don’t want you taking off on your own...!”

Two people push their way out of the brush.

Prince Guido is the first to appear from the thicket, and he’s the one scolding her for going off on her own. The moment he notices she’s not alone, he draws his sword and shouts, “Why are you people here?!”

Golem follows after him and gives us an equally bewildered look.

Yeah, I bet they don’t have a clue what’s going on. I’m honestly just as confused when I take a look around me. Julius is here, I’m here; so is Sereniel, Regulus, and Aela. With Guido and Golem joining the party, we’ve collected most of the main manga cast, excluding Laurent. Aela’s busy healing Regulus’s

arm and she just finished healing me...!

Uh, yeah, I seriously have no idea how to explain this. As I'm trying to think up a good explanation, Aela finishes with Regulus and stands.

"I'm sorry for taking off, Prince Guido. Please sheathe your sword! No one here has done anything wrong," she says in appeal, but he just stares at her face, trying to assess these bizarre circumstances.

"A-Aela...what in the world is going on? Get away from them first. You're surrounded by the Four Grand Magi!" he yells, looking at Sereniel and Regulus beside her. More like glared at them. Hatred flares in his keen eyes before he returns his gaze to Aela.

"Don't forget that they're responsible for Lylish's death! Am I wrong? Their attack ended Lylish...!" Golem thunders, his battled-hardened face crumpling with her loss.

Right. Lylish died in Aela's hands after protecting her from the village-obliterating attack. Golem's woeful voice brings back the painful memory of what happened only hours ago.

"Prince Guido, Sir Golem...I have good reason for coming here without telling you. You see...I...sensed Lylish," Aela confesses, her voice weaker than tinkling glass. The color has leached from her usually rosy cheeks.

"You sensed her? How? She died protecting us...," Prince Guido reminds her.

"Yes. Lylish died." Aela nods. "She burned up the last of her life energy protecting me and vanished in a spark of light. But then I sensed magic similar to hers coming from over here. So I rushed to the source..." Tears gradually fill Aela's voice as she speaks until it becomes too hard to say the rest, and she drops her pained gaze to her feet.

Guido's eyes bulge. "Lylish survived?"

Dismay shimmers in her eyes at his question, and then she quietly shakes her head.

"I...I don't know. Wh-What I saw was definitely L-Lylish...but it was...Lylish...but not Lylish...because Lylish...!"

Crystalline teardrops finally spill over from her eyes. She chews out the words through her tears, unsure of how to express the truth she discovered.

Guido lowers his sword and approaches her. “Aela? What’s wrong? What happened?” he asks, tenderly putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her against his chest, as if to protect her from us. His animosity-filled eyes flick our way again. “What did you do to Aela? I’ve never seen her so flustered before. What spell did you bewitch her with?”

“N-No, Your Highness! They...they didn’t do anything! I’m sorry. I need to...be clearer...but I’m so confused... B-Because L-Lylish...!” Aela rambles, turning paler by the second and failing to finish that sentence yet again.

I think Aela’s kindness and, most of all, her love for Lylish is preventing her from saying the rest. Or maybe she just doesn’t want to accept the truth.

That’s why, even though it might make her sadder, I say it in her place.

“Lylish was a homunculus created by Analia’s newest Grand Magi, Clark,” I explain.

Aela’s wide eyes swivel toward me. She gives a slight nod and weeps.

“I see. So that’s what happened,” Julius murmurs beside me.

Julius was able to put the various pieces together after only hearing a fraction of what Clark said, but Golem and Guido are in shock because they have very little information about what happened.

“A homunculus? What do you...mean?” Guido inquires, baffled.

“It’s a long story. I have a lot of things to fill you in on, plus Aela must be drained after using her healing magic twice, and she’s crying, and I’m hungry. So let’s talk in detail after we return to my village,” I suggest.

Guido frowns as he weighs my suggestion, but he gives a slow nod after looking at Aela sobbing. “Fine. Let’s do that. You tried to protect us earlier... I’ll trust you.”

After the prince says his part, Sereniel sweeps her hair over her shoulder like a queen. “...I have a lot to ask you about, too. Like the Demon Lord’s true form... You will tell me, Elle.”

“I will.”

And so we trudge back to Elle Village to the sound of Aela’s sobs and a dark cloud hanging over our heads.

Chapter 10: A Discussion about the Truth

LAURENT broke down crying upon my safe return to Elle Village. What a cutie. Manga Laurent was a character with a dark side, but look at how genuine he's turned out to be. He was so overjoyed to have me back that he didn't notice Sereniel and Regulus behind me, and reeled in shock when he finally registered them.

Or more like he was ready to pounce on them. But I managed to talk him down. Now he's just acting like a wary cat watching their every move.

Laurent's forwardness is part of what makes him cute, but he's quick to pick a fight. Not that I'm one to talk.

For that matter, aren't Golem and Prince Guido from Saint Aela's group the same way? That goes for Laurent and Julius from my village, too. They all whip out their swords and spells first and talk things out later. I can't help feeling like their jumping the gun is always stealing the limelight from me... Don't go there, me. I shouldn't think too much about it.

Long story short, I invited Laurent to join us, to appease his wildly protective side, and had him come along with everyone else to the parlor in my house, which is the biggest building in Elle Village to have survived the Grand Magi's attack without a scratch.

And just like that, Saint Aela's party and the Four Grand Magi are sitting at a table for ten.

I had asked Canna to prepare tea and snacks, which liven up the table but do nothing for the dour mood.

Sereniel is the first to breach the bloodlust hanging in the air. "Regulus, you and Elle seemed to know about it, but what's all this talk about the Demon Lord being a magic circle?" She gracefully crosses her legs and folds her arms under her ample breasts, drawing them closer together. Does she do that on purpose or is it subconscious?

“Wait. Lylish comes first. What’s this business about Lylish being a homunculus?” Golem cuts in, almost as if to antagonize Sereniel.

Sereniel shoots him a loathsome look.

Come on, people! You’re all too quick to start a fight. I wish you would be discerning about it like me. Be like me!

“Hey! Settle down there! You all have such short fuses. As the clever mayor of Elle Village, I will cover each topic in turn, so mind your manners!” I say to stop the storm brewing at the table.

“Clever...,” Sereniel mutters under her breath, like she has a problem with it.

How rude! She makes it sound like I’m not clever!

From the seat next to me, Julius skewers Sereniel with his eyes. “Don’t interrupt Elle, pestilence,” he growls at her in a voice cold enough to freeze the sun. The room temperature plummets faster than Laurent likes to pick a fight.

“Brr! It’s freezing! And it stings! Julius, stop that! Ice is growing on my feet...!” Sereniel wails with purple lips.

I glance down at her feet where ice steadily crawls up her ankles. A sheet of ice is covering the ground at Golem’s feet, too.

The sudden drop in temperature is due to Julius’s magic. *Don’t become a part of the problem, Julius!*

“H-Hey! Don’t you start using magic, either!”

“Why are you mad? I was simply silencing the flies— Ghh!”

I smack Julius’s hot head. He rubs the spot and looks at me like he can’t believe what I just did.

“What was that for?”

That’s my line! When it comes down to it, Julius is the first to pick a fight. Which is a surprise given his normally calm nature. He was called the Prince of Glacial Beauty in the manga, too, and his cool disposition was his selling point. Where did that character go?!

“For crying out loud, rein in your temper! You know, it’s that ‘shoot first, ask

questions later' attitude of yours that keeps making things more complicated than they need to be!" I rail. Guilty, he averts his gaze. And it seems like he undid his ice spell because the temperature has returned to normal.

Julius always looks like he's cool and in control and his appearance trends more toward expressionless, yet despite all that, his temper is shorter than a fuse. He jumped straight to battle mode with Saint Aela's group and the Grand Magi.

I guess with his power, it's easier to just annihilate anything suspicious before it becomes a problem... What a bloodthirsty mindset. Scary! He wasn't the secret villain love interest for nothing.

"You know what, magic is banned from this table!" I proclaim, my pitch rising with my irritation. "As long as you are in the grand dominion of Elle Village, whatever I say goes! I'm the mayor. That's how it is! Sheesh."

Once I catch my breath, I get right into what they want to hear. "All right, I'm going to tell you everything I know and heard from Clark about the Demon Lord and Lylish... I know Aela's group would rather hear about Lylish first, but I'm starting with the Demon Lord."

With that, I go into a long explanation about everything that's happened up to this point, starting with why Julius and I absconded. After I finish talking about the Demon Lord being a magic circle and the magic circle's objective, Prince Guido jumps from his seat, knocking it back.

"You can't expect me to believe that. The Demon Lord is just some magic circle?! And one that's trying to create a country of people controlled by magic?!"

I completely understand how hard it is to accept. I was in denial and total shock at first, too. So much so that I fled the country.

"That's right. What we call the Demon Lord is a magic circle configured to lead us into a future controlled by magic. The war between Analia and Gaea was dragged out as just another step in its calculations," I clarify and gesture for Prince Guido to sit back down before he does more damage to my chair.

Sereniel heavily sighs with her eyes closed. "A future controlled by magic...?"

Haha. What a joke. Makes you wonder what the Demon Lord thinks of Analia's citizens. Basically he—or it—thought nothing of us? We Analians were fighting for our lives in order to pump magic particles out of distressed Gaeans? And then we fed those magic particles into the magic circle meant to control us? ...Without knowing any better, I always thought I was fighting for the Demon Lord and for my country, so I kept at it...like a fool," she finishes in a dark voice.

I slightly incline my head, affirming everything she said.

The Demon Lord never loved Analia's citizens. Not even anything close to love. We were nothing more than pawns to an inanimate drawing. Nevertheless, we loved the Demon Lord with everything we had.

"What are magic particles?" Golem's quizzical inquiry breaks through the weight pressing down on my chest.

The term *magic particles* seems to be uncommon in Gaea, where magic isn't a part of their culture.

"It's a magic element that comes from a person's negative emotions. Magic particles can't be seen with the naked eye by most people, but it's in the air all around us," Julius explains for the Gaeans' benefit. "Without it, sorcerers can't use magic, and magic circles won't work, either. In other words, the Demon Lord is attempting to make a country with an endless supply of magic particles to keep its magic circle working... Ultimately, the war between Analia and Gaea was fought for nothing more than to keep the Demon Lord's magic circle operational."

Astonishment freezes every Gaeans' face.

"That's the truth," I say, backing Julius up since our Gaeon friends look skeptical. "The Demon Lord's objective was to keep Gaea on the precipice of near losses and in a miserable state rather than drawing the war to a close. In order to lead humanity into a magically controlled world, it intentionally caused people in the Kingdom of Gaea to suffer for a long time... I'm not trying to make excuses, but Analians don't know that. We believed the war was for us and were happy to die for our lord. Analians love and respect the Demon Lord more than anything, so we went to war without questioning it."

It makes me think back on the time I only ever thought about the Demon

Lord. Back on the girl who lived solely for his praise. The version of myself who forewent thinking for herself because everything the Demon Lord said was just and absolute.

Suddenly, there's a loud bang on the table. I look toward the source of the sound and find Golem with his trembling fists denting the wood.

"A world controlled by magic? All for some damn magic particles! That's why we Gaeans have been made to suffer these long years...?!" he thunders and bites his lip so hard blood trickles down his chin. Anger shakes his broad, muscular frame.

The Demon Lord's actions are even worse for Gaea.

Prince Guido places a hand on Golem's shoulder and seethes "We won't let him get away with it" in a threatening voice.

I know he's talking about the Demon Lord and not me, but his unforgiving tone still gives me the chills.

"Gaea's citizens aren't the only victims. Analia's own citizens have been deceived. The Demon Lord has cheated and trifled with every person doing their best to make a life for themselves in this world. That should never be allowed to go on," he says, looking around the table with bold determination.

"That's right. We can't let this pass. I absolutely won't let this go on without a fight!" I finish in the same vein as Guido.

Sereniel's worried eyes find me across the table. "I see... You left Analia after discovering the truth."

I weakly bob my head.

"That decision is very like you. When you suddenly betrayed the Demon Lord you devoted your life to...I thought you were led astray by Julius..."

Julius snorts at Sereniel's accusation.

She ignores him and directs her barbed gaze at Regulus. "But what excuse do you have, Regulus? You knew the truth about the Demon Lord. Why did you hide it from us?" she asks in a harsh tone full of blame.

Sereniel never drops her temptress smile, but her ashen face is drawn tight.

Regulus meets her gaze and drops his.

“...I have no excuse on that front. The only thing that I can say, while it might come across as an excuse, is that I didn’t know what the magic circle was configured for. And naturally not about the point of the war. I couldn’t decipher the more complex sections of the circle. I entered the inner sanctum, realized there was just a magic circle, and guessed there might not be a Demon Lord. However, I fled the room without confirming the truth and never went there again... I was afraid...I wouldn’t be able to accept the truth.” Regulus speaks from the heart, deep wrinkles forming on his forehead with his grief, the corners of his eyes misting.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much, Regulus. If you are to blame for seeing and not knowing, then I am even more at fault for obeying the Demon Lord when I could decipher its meaning to a certain extent,” Julius confesses, his voice just as dark and gloomy, which makes me look up at him. Our eyes meet.

“Like you, I was in denial and ran from the truth until I met Elle. Things are different now. I have Elle in my life. I won’t run anymore,” he says with such a gentle look in his eyes, I’m forced to look away for fear he’ll see my flushed cheeks.

Seriously, Julius’s face is all he’s got going for him! It’s all about the face! W-Well, not that his personality isn’t appealing in a way. He’s surprisingly honest, serious, and he also called me cute a few times— Bad thoughts! Now’s not the time to be fawning over Julius!

I rein in my thoughts with a loud cough and rise from my chair.

“N-No more of that! It doesn’t matter who’s at fault. I’m just as guilty of fleeing the country after learning the truth. Running away was all we could do! But things are going to be different. I’m going to defeat the Demon Lord! Defeating the Demon Lord—destroying that nasty magic circle—will end the war and let me enjoy a peaceful life in Elle Village. Most of all, that demon circle is after my heart and has already inflicted damage on my stupendous village! I can’t let it roam free!” I emphasize my point with clenched fists.

“I completely concur with you,” Prince Guido responds. “We can’t let the Demon Lord stay unchecked.”

Aela and Golem nod in agreement.

Perfect! Looks like I can count on the Gaea half to lend a hand. Then again, they were always the side opposing the Demon Lord. All that's left is— I look at Sereniel and Regulus.

"I have no objections, either," Sereniel says. "A world where humans are dominated by magic...? Ridiculous. Besides, my loyalty went out the door the moment I learned the Demon Lord is just some scribbles on the wall. I obeyed orders because I always thought that the Demon Lord was a handsome, tall man with incredibly high specs as a sorcerer!" She's voicing her support for an entirely disappointing reason.

Regulus levels her with an exasperated look, then sighs. "I also can't stand the Demon Lord's methods. These old bones are yours to use," he offers.

Sereniel's reason is questionable, but at least it's looking like Analia's Grand Magi are on board with joining forces.

"All four of the Grand Magi have left Analia. Now's the time to attack before more are appointed," Regulus recommends.

"Clark is definitely going to be our biggest enemy," Sereniel stresses, brushing a curl off her shoulder.

That reminds me of Clark's sickening smirk before he shattered into a million pieces of ice. Right, Clark's still a problem. He's chosen to stay with Analia even after learning the truth about the Demon Lord's magic circle. Fighting him is unavoidable.

"Speaking of Clark," Sereniel adds, "it was his homunculus that came with us to this village, right? I didn't think there were any sorcerers capable of making such elaborate creations..."

"I'd venture a guess and say that he copied the formula used to make the DemiOracle," Julius answers. "The DemiOracle is a homunculus as well. Some of the magic circles in the inner sanctum referenced the formula to make it. Copying that formula should result in a refined and elaborate homunculus."

I didn't know there was a magic circle like that inside the magic sanctum. Then that solidifies my theory...

“Hey, Julius? Is it correct to assume the DemiOracle is a homunculus created by the sorcerer who drew up the magic circle controlling Analia?”

“You can bet on it. Whoever it was, they were a terrifying sorcerer capable of crafting thousands of complex magic circles...,” he says in a scandalized whisper.

I completely agree. And with that knowledge, my theory has become conviction. Aela is probably—

“I want to know more about these homunculi. Elle, you said Lylish is one of Clark’s creations, right? Can you clarify that for me?” Guido says, tossing out the most important question yet.

Oh yeah, I need to explain that part, too. But it’s not easy to tell them. How do I break the news? I sneak a glance at Aela.

Talking about this will likely hurt her more than anything. Her complexion is already a sickly white, and she’s definitely depressed. But I can’t skip this piece of information. I have to bring it up.

I harden my resolve with a deep breath and breach the topic. “Lylish was one of Clark’s homunculi. I’m fairly positive she is how he located Elle Village. Your mission with the messenger brought her here by coincidence, and she reported our presence back to Clark right away.”

“That can’t be...!” Aela cries out, breaking her silent brooding. “Why would he send me a homunculus? Lylish was full of life, a cutie, and always there to save us! She granted me these saintly powers! Lylish taught me about God’s power!” She speaks all in one breath, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I think it’s probably because you share the same blood as the Demon Lord—his descendant. The Demon Lord I’m talking about is the sorcerer who established Analia and left behind that appalling magic circle.”

After I give that explanation, Aela murmurs with a stunned look, “The Demon Lord’s...descendant?”

“Your healing is a special power that runs in your bloodline. And it’s a sure bet the Demon Lord used that power, too. The proof is in the DemiOracle he made using a similar style of healing magic, though it’s nowhere near your level, Aela,” I explain, trying to make it as easy for her to understand as I can. “Then

you have what Clark said. With the power coursing through the Demon Lord's unique bloodline and an infinite supply of magic, a miracle resulting in the Demon Lord's resurrection will occur. This is just a guess, but I think your healing spells have the potential to revive the dead if your magic supply is infinite."

"No way. I can't revive the dead..."

"You might not be able to right now. But what if you got hold of an infinite supply of magic and learned how to bend it to your will?"

I know what no one else here does. In the manga, Aela gains more and more power throughout her battles with strong enemies. It's a real possibility for her to become powerful enough to pull it off.

I look at the saint weighed down by sorrow and confusion and force her to face reality. "In order to awaken your natural powers and mature them, Lylish brought you the plausible goal of subjugating the Demon Lord so you had a reason to gain experience. She wanted to make you capable of casting several miraculous spells in a row."

Thinking back on it, Lylish was often the driving factor in the manga. Imagining the ending of my favorite story sends shivers down my spine. What if Aela, not knowing any better, came to the Demon Lord's castle to defeat him by sacrificing my heart and using the exact spell that revives him?

"Lies! Lylish wasn't like that...!" Aela bursts out, another waterfall of tears spilling over. Guido puts his arm around her shoulders to comfort her.

Aela isn't the only one hurting. Lylish was a friend to both Golem and Guido. They aren't outsiders to the pain she feels. It hurts me just watching them, and I only know snippets of their relationship from the manga.

"To sum it up, the magic circle controlling Analia is trying to use Aela's power to revive the person who made it. To make that happen, this Clark guy sent Lylish to her. That's the gist of it, right?" Guido quietly inquires, hugging Aela to him and stroking her hair with a comforting rhythm. His eyes are as hard as nails and downright scary.

"You've got it." I nod and feel Sereniel's cutting gaze pierce into me.

“Okay, I get this whole thing about the Aela girl’s powers, but, Elle, I want to know why they are after your heart. Can it really produce an infinite supply of magic?”

I consider answering her by saying it really can, but I’m not all too sure about it myself. The whole thing is sketchy. Julius did tell me that I have the potential to become a perpetual magic generator...

“Elle definitely possesses the ability to put out an endless supply of magic,” Julius answers in my place when I spend too much time overthinking. “Back in Analia, she was conducting constant experiments to measure her magic. It’s safe to say the magic circle sleeping within the inner sanctum has confirmed that she can become a perpetual magic generator. It seeks her heart for that precise reason. The heart is the source of magic. The magic circle is planning to offer up Elle’s heart as the power source for Aela’s magic in order to revive the Demon Lord.”

A dark, dismal expression clouds his handsome face as he mutters in a barely audible voice, “But...”

I look up at him, waiting for the rest, but when our eyes meet, he shakes his head, insisting it’s nothing to worry about.

What was that about? Does he lack confidence in what he has to say? That’s not like him. I’m curious now. But I can’t follow up because Sereniel exhales louder than a huffing bull.

“I always thought Elle had a lot of magic, but not that she was that special. In any case, the Demon Lord—or more like the person who made that magic circle—was outta their mind. They’re essentially trying to revive their long-since-decayed body, right? For that matter, doesn’t resurrecting that way make them similar to a homunculus? It’s not like they will get to keep the same abilities, personality, and memories from hundreds of years ago.”

“Aela’s special magic is needed for that purpose. Those powers will create a body different from a homunculus. You saw what she did earlier. The way Regulus’s arm regrew. It is extremely likely she will revive the Demon Lord with his full abilities, personality, and memories.”

Julius’s answer silences the room.

I can't argue with that theory after seeing how awesome and unreal Aela's power is.

Aela, having calmed down a bit, finally speaks. "I might actually...be capable of fully reviving someone with their memories intact if I have an endless supply of magic, but something is decisively missing for me to do that. The source of the body—that is, a part of the Demon Lord's body. And it can't be decomposed."

"What? Did the Demon Lord not predict that far?" Regulus interjects, excited by this new piece of information. "More than five hundred years have passed since Analia was founded. Even if the body was stored somewhere, it's likely a decomposing mummy by now! Doesn't that make reviving the Demon Lord impossible?"

Julius douses his hope with a hard shake of his head. "Unfortunately, no. A large piece of the Demon Lord wanders the heart of Analia without aging."

"What piece?"

"The DemiOracle. When we create homunculi—not just create homunculi, but use any large-scale spell—we offer our blood to better control the magic once it's released outside of us. I strongly believe that the Demon Lord used a lot of blood to create the homunculus we call DemiOracle. His blood has been preserved all this time within the DemiOracle's body, unaffected by the elements. The proof lies in the DemiOracle using magic in a similar vein as Aela. It can make healing elixirs that may pale in comparison to her powers but is closer than anything else we have seen."

Gasps come from every Analian at the table.

"So Clark's going to use the Demon Lord's blood preserved in the DemiOracle to bring him back to life...," Sereniel summarizes, bringing silence to the room once again.

The Demon Lord shared his lifeblood with the DemiOracle in preparation for the day he would be revived. This entity we call Demon Lord has been carefully preparing for this moment from hundreds of years ago, in ways we can't even begin to comprehend. His magical power is surely higher than anyone in the world today. Probably even Julius.

What will happen to us if the Demon Lord returns? I think back to the magic circle I saw in the Demon Lord's castle. In the back of my mind, I see the sorcerers controlled by the magic circle and the Gaeans made to suffer solely to produce magic.

I squeeze the sides of my red velvet skirt.

The Demon Lord must never be allowed to return. Never. And that's not just because he needs my heart to do it.

The Demon Lord's ideals and vision for the world makes a mockery of those of us who have eked out a living in this land. We can't let it happen.

I sweep my gaze around the table. Tension and nerves have hardened their faces. They might be coping with the new reality that we are facing a bigger enemy than any of us realized.

So I stand up in a whoosh of skirts. "Don't let this news steal your spirit! I'm sure you have all already come to this conclusion, but there is a super easy route we can take to prevent the Demon Lord's resurrection," I announce in the cheeriest voice I can muster. Julius frowns.

"Elle, what are you going to say?"

"Do you have to ask? I'm going to say what everyone is thinking. You can prevent his resurrection by burning my heart. Then there won't be a perpetual magic generator to power the Demon Lord's revival for some time."

"I'll never let that happen!" Julius thunders, slamming the table and flipping his chair over when he springs to his feet.

"J-Julius, calm down. I-I'm not too keen on dying, either. It's a last resort!"

"I won't allow it even as a last resort!" Julius roars, showing more anger than I've ever seen from him.

Aela shoves back her chair and stands, too. "He's right, Elle! Besides, if it comes to that, the plan works just as well with my death, right? Isn't my magic necessary for the Demon Lord's revival?"

Guido shakes his head. "...No, if it's the Demon Lord's bloodline that's needed, then there are probably a lot of replacements for you, Aela," he says,

his expression bleak. “If the small village you grew up in was established by the Demon Lord long ago, almost any of the villagers could have the same hidden power. Should you die, they will just awaken your replacement and teach them how to do it.”

“N-No!” Aela cries and looks at me, the pain on her face saying more than words can. “B-But we can’t just let her throw away her life...!”

So says the girl who just offered to throw away her own life when she thought it was a viable option. Her kindness is real. And that is exactly why my decision won’t change.

“My magic-generating heart is probably a mutation. I can’t say it won’t happen again, but seeing as the Demon Lord hasn’t rezzed yet, it’s not common. So by burning my heart, we might put off the Demon Lord’s revival for a while if not forever... But I’ll say it again: I don’t plan on going down without a fight! I just wanted to put it out there as a last resort. All we’ve got to do is take down Clark and smash Analia’s magic circle before it gets to that point. Or we eradicate all the DemiOracles. And let’s face it, as long as that magic circle exists, the hellish world the Demon Lord envisioned is still a possibility even if he doesn’t come back. Am I wrong?” I say and look in turn at each person at the table.

Aela is so worried about me her face has crumpled with tears. Guido and Golem have their hands on her shoulders to give her support.

Questions fill Laurent’s gaze, as all of this is news to him. Readiness to take on whatever comes brims in the looks I’m receiving from Sereniel and Regulus. And then there’s Julius at my side.

Anything is possible with this group. I mean, this is the all-star cast from my favorite manga! A dream team including both the good and the bad side. Nothing is impossible when you gather this many aces!

“Together we will end the Demon Lord—end the kingdom of Analia! Just think of it like you’re already on the winning side. After all, you have beside you the glorious mayor who loves Elle Village most and is most loved by Elle Village! Me, the gorgeous and adorable grand sorceress Elle!” I declare in the brightest voice possible and smile.

Chapter 11: A Moment in Elle Village

ON the same day the former Analian Four Grand Magi joined forces with Saint Aela's party and swore to defeat the Demon Lord, we teleported to Laurent's former village to evacuate Elle Village.

After all, tomorrow we will set out to defeat the Demon Lord with all the major players on our side. Our top priority is to move Elle Village and eliminate any concerns about them being taken hostage or harmed.

To make the evacuation area extra secure, Laurent draws a barrier around the entire village while Julius teaches him high-level defense spells.

With the defenses strengthened, all that's left is to spend the night recharging our batteries before heading to the Demon Lord's castle tomorrow.

So we decided to treat ourselves to a pre-vanquish-the-Demon-Lord celebration to get better acquainted with our new team members.

Partying outdoors is the best!

"Go on, eat up! Feast upon the tantalizing food cooked by the legendary chef Meide, one of the Four Grand Magi of Elle Village! It's so delicious it's guaranteed to melt in your mouth and stick to your ribs! Her devilish food is capable of turning even Analia's former strongest Grand Magi, Julius, into a little boy ready to eat you out of house and home!"

Saint Aela's party, our newest recruits into Elle Village, were still so glum I had to recommend Grand Magi Meide's delicacies to them.

It seems to have done the job, since the thick tension has died down and Aela's group as well as Regulus and Sereniel have begun to relax, and friendly conversation is starting up here and there.

Looks like they've opened up to one another quite a bit.

Or maybe too much. Golem and Regulus decide to arm wrestle for whatever reason, get worked up over their match, and start arguing about their

personalities being too similar, and then Sereniel throws out “Don’t fight over me, boys!” even though I’m positive it has nothing to do with her. They’re out of control.

In the heat of the moment, Golem and Regulus destroy part of the magic circle Laurent just finished drawing and get laid into by the seventeen-year-old even though they are several dozen years his senior.

Aela smiles throughout the chaotic show, and Prince Guido gazes upon her smiling face with such love and adoration it makes my skin crawl... I wonder if that means the two of them are already a couple.

If they are, will Julius get rejected by Aela even if he falls for her? And if he does...when he does...will I—

I’m surprised by the relief spreading through me.

What’s wrong with me? Why am I thinking this way? Julius is my friend, and someone to whom I would gladly hand over the top spot as Elle Village’s first-ranked Grand Magi, and yet I can’t bring myself to support his feelings... How could I be so horrible as to be relieved at the thought of him being rejected?

“Lady Elle, I want to talk to you about something...,” Laurent says to me with reserve.

“Sure. Talk away,” I respond. Apparently, he doesn’t want anyone else to hear, because he takes me to a quiet place away from the din of the party.

“What did you want to talk about alone...?” I ask since he seems nervous.

He closes his eyes and opens them again, determined. “I want you to take me with you!”

I didn’t expect him to say that.

“I can’t. Who will protect Elle Village if you come?”

“But I set up all the defenses. It shouldn’t be easy to—”

“*Shouldn’t* isn’t good enough,” I say over him. “We don’t know what Clark will pull. Someone has to stay behind to protect the village.”

“But if something were to happen to you—”

“Something happen to me? Pshaw! I’ll be fine, for I am Elle Village’s glorious mayor, Elle!”

“I know. I know and still worry. Not because you’re weak, Lady Elle... But because I am weak. When I think something might happen to you, I...” He trails off, looking like his back is up against the wall and he’s about to lose everything that matters to him.

I frown. “Laurent, I will be okay. Julius and Aela will be with me,” I say to assuage his worries, but it does nothing to wipe the hard look off his face.

What can I say? Before I have the answer, Laurent speaks.

“You are my light, Lady Elle. When you saved my village, you shone a light into my dark world. If you disappear, I’ll be plunged back into the darkness.”

I dumbly blink in response to his sincere gaze and distraught voice.

I keep forgetting that Laurent was originally, in the manga, a character who seemed kind but could become deranged at the drop of a hat because of the darkness he carried with him. I showed up at just the right time to save his village from annihilation, but his potential to turn *yandere* is still alive and well.

My heart aches when I see him pushed to the edge like this, because I think of him like a little brother. I didn’t realize it would hurt him so much to be left behind... But I need him to stay and look after everyone.

“You won’t see that darkness again. There’s no worst-case scenario where I won’t return. I swear I will come back. So I want you to protect the place I will come home to, Laurent. I can take on the Demon Lord with peace of mind because I know you will be here for me,” I tell him.

His eyes widen. “Lady Elle...it’s not fair when you put it that way.”

“But it’s the truth,” I say with a smile.

Laurent exhales a long-suffering sigh and throws up his hands in defeat. And then he lets a sunnier expression chase away the clouds covering his face.

“...Okay. I will wait for you to come back home, Lady Elle. But can I get a reward for listening to you and staying behind...?”

His entreating eyes stir up my desire to take care of him. I puff out my chest

and put a hand on my hip.

“A reward? Sure thing! I’ll give you anything you want! Want Meide to whip up a meal just for you? Or is there something else you have been wanting?”

Grand Sorceress Elle never goes back on her word! I’ll sell every gem and treasure I have to grant his wish!

“In that case, um, can I hug you?”

“Hug me? Like a goodbye hug? I don’t mind...but is that all you want?”

“It’s more than enough for me,” he says, seemingly thrilled I didn’t reject his request. I open my arms, and he steps closer and puts his arms around me.



He really doesn't ask for much, being satisfied with something that could pass as a greeting. Laurent sure has grown, though. He was supposed to be a *shota* in the manga...and now he's tall and has muscles. Will I ever outgrow being a *loli*?

But I'm still surprised he wanted a hug. I wonder if he's still at the age where he wants to be coddled by his mother. Even though he's older than me. No matter what I do, I can't shake the first impression I had of him as a little boy.

"Lady Elle, I love you."

Laurent says such a sweet thing while hugging me that I pat him on the back. "Me too. I love you, Laurent. I obviously love everyone from Elle Village. So take care of the place while I'm away."

"...I will."

I'm a little curious why his answer is so despondent, but at least he gives a big nod.

Laurent will be here for Elle Village. He will definitely protect everyone. So all that's left is to destroy the magic circle and come back alive! And then I can begin a fun new life in Elle Village.

Laurent slowly releases me, seemingly satisfied with the length of our hug.

"Is that good enough for you?" I ask to double-check. "Tell me if there's anything else you wish for. I want to make sure you get your reward fair and square."

I mean, a hug is basically just a kind of greeting.

Laurent is stunned by my proposition. "Really? I can ask for more? Then...if I can be greedy, kiss—"

"You look like you're having fun, Laurent." Julius's voice cuts through Laurent's request, causing me to turn around and discover how close he is. Since when did he get here? Moreover, there are deep lines in his brow, and he's spearing Laurent with his glacial glare.

"Master, what's with your timing?" Laurent throws up his hands in surrender. Then he faces me again. "Please save the rest of my reward for when you safely

come back home,” he says with a smile, then turns back to Julius. “Master, please look after Lady Elle. If she doesn’t come back...I surely won’t stay sane.” His eyes are dead serious as he delivers his warning.

Julius nods with the same serious gleam. “...I know. We will come back no matter what.”

Laurent seems satisfied by his answer.

“Lady Elle, Master Julius seems like he wants to talk, too, so I will take my leave here. Oh and...” Laurent brings his lips to my ear and whispers so softly that Julius can’t hear, “Please think about how you feel the moment Master does the same thing I did to you. Consider how your feelings differ between me and him.”

He wants me to think about the difference between what they do to me? I’m trying to figure out what he means, when he tips over backward.

“You’re too close. Weren’t you going to leave? Go. Now.”

It looks like Julius yanked him back by his collar.

“You’re too rough, Master. I was about to leave without you telling me to,” Laurent says and leaves with the boyish smile I’ve come to associate with him.

I don’t quite understand what he was trying to tell me... What did he mean?

“Good grief. I can never let down my guard. Also, Laurent wasn’t joking,” Julius says in a gruff voice as he watches Laurent disappear into the distance.

“About what?”

“Losing his sanity if he loses you. Sheesh. He’s got guts, threatening me like that.”

“That was a threat?”

“Who knows what will happen to this village if he loses his mind and his magic runs amok. Laurent’s talent as a sorcerer is phenomenal. He is already levels above the average Analian sorcerer despite having only just started learning how to use magic. I can foresee him becoming the second Demon Lord in history after losing you,” Julius says with a straight face, which makes it extra impactful.

“Does that mean he’s better than you, Julius?”

“I’m stronger right now, but only time will tell if that will change. That is how much potential he has.”

Go, Laurent! You made Julius speak so highly of you! You’ve proved why you were on Saint Aela’s side as a genius sorcerer in the manga. Though you got defeated after your mental instability was attacked.

But doesn’t that mean Elle Village is in danger if I don’t come back? Hey, Laurent, isn’t that a direct threat against me? Now I really have to return no matter the cost!

I feel Julius’s gaze on me and look up. Our eyes meet. Maybe it’s just my imagination, but he seems to be studying me with a seductive smile...

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you looking at?!” I shout in the shock of the moment.

Julius cocks his head to the side and asks “Am I not supposed to look at you?” in his usual manner

“Y-Y-Y-You can if you want to...”

But, but he’s staring so hard my face might fall off! I was just trying to see where he was at and he was already looking at me... Hold on, could I be in an abyss? Like the kind where he’ll already be stealing at look at me when I go to steal a look at him?

I’m so flustered my thoughts are becoming incoherent.

“There is something I want to confirm with you before we go to Analia tomorrow,” he says.

“What’s that?”

“...Is it all right to assume that you really don’t want the Demon Lord to come back to life?” Julius throws that question out of left field, and my eyes spin.

“Huh? Of course I don’t. Aren’t we going to storm the castle tomorrow to destroy the magic circle so that the Demon Lord can’t be revived? Besides, I have to die for him to be resurrected. That’s the last thing I wanna do!” I say, stating the obvious.

“What if it were possible,” Julius starts, sounding reluctant, “to revive the Demon Lord without killing you?”

“Where did that come from? You never talk about what-if scenarios. Well, even if I don’t have to die for it, I’ll still do whatever it takes to stop him!” I’m making myself as clear as possible, and it still isn’t enough to erase the worry from him.

“Do you really mean that? You once worshiped the Demon Lord, Elle. You gave him the same love a child does a parent—no, what you held for him was a step above that. You probably felt more betrayed than anything else after learning it was a magic circle, but if the Demon Lord is revived, he will have a real body. Real emotions. And then the Demon Lord might shower you with the love you always longed for.”

Julius’s words crash into me, taking away my breath.

I mean, when he puts it like that, that’s one legitimate outcome... I can’t deny that in the past I loved the Demon Lord and always thought about how I could get him to praise me. I believed the Demon Lord was human and would pat me on the head when I did a good job. I lived under the assumption that he would shower me with kind words. That he would love me.

And that’s why it was such a shock to discover the Demon Lord was really a magic circle all along.

If the Demon Lord is an inanimate magic circle, then he won’t love me, or more than that, he won’t be disappointed, saddened, or angry because of me. He won’t feel or think a single thing about me.

And after seeing the future plotted by the magic circle, I realized that the Demon Lord never thought anything about any of us; it only wanted us to become tools to build a world controlled by magic.

I left my country for that reason.

But say the Demon Lord is revived? The sorcerer who made that magic circle will come back, and when he does, will he...will he pat me on the head and do all the things I’ve longed for? Will he praise me when I do good? Will he get angry if I do something dangerous? And then...

I let my thoughts travel to that point and feel like the things I wished for more than anything else in the past aren't so great after all.

It just doesn't sit right with me anymore... After all, I have Elle Village now.

...Julius is here for me now.

He rejoices with me when I'm happy, weeps with me when I am sad, is happy to listen whenever I feel like announcing myself to the room, and eats a meal with me whenever I get hungry. I already have someone special like that in my life.

"Hmph! Julius, don't start underestimating Elle Village's grand sorceress mayor Elle! I've long since graduated from the Demon Lord. Besides, I want no part of the future envisioned by the magic circle. I'd much rather continue having fun living with everyone in Elle Village!" I make myself very clear, and that finally gets Julius to crack a smile.

"I see. I'm relieved to hear you say that."

"Hmph! While we're on the topic, what about you, Julius? You were one of the Four Grand Magi who formerly served the Demon Lord, just as much as I was! Every human in Analia loved the Demon Lord. Will you be okay?" I throw the question right back at him.

"It's not an issue for me. I have someone...I love much more. So much it appears there's no room left for the Demon Lord."

My heart leaps against my chest so hard I cover it with my hand to make sure it didn't burst out. How could it not ache? He just said he loves someone...

I think back to my favorite scenes in the manga, the scenes where Julius is saved by Aela, absconds from his country, and does everything for her sake...

"...Is the person you love...Aela?" The words spill past my pouting lips.

Crud. I didn't want to ask him like this... But words can't be taken back once they're said.

"Aela? Why would that name of all names come up now?" Julius asks as if she's the last person he could ever like, his eyebrows raised heavenward.

But I know!

“B-Because you like her...right?” I venture, and it makes Julius release the most exasperated sigh I’ve ever heard. And he’s looking at me like he would an ignoramus!

“Not in a million years. There’s no way I’d fall for a woman I met just the other day.”

“Y-You might think that way now, but you will definitely fall for her once you get to know her better.”

“I will not.”

“You will, too!”

“I won’t.”

“You will!”

I know he will!

“Haa,” he sighs again. “What gave you that impression?”

I have my knowledge from the manga, but there’s also the feeling I got when Julius smiled that one time...

Thinking about his smile makes me say my next words. “B-Because you never smile for anyone outside of Elle Village, and even that is rare, but you were beaming when Aela fixed my arm!”

“Because she healed your injuries!” he shouts back, getting pulled into the heat of the moment with me.

“But it felt like you two were gazing into each other’s eyes for a while. Like this kinda long, loving stare!”

“That’s just your interpretation. Though I was surprised by her unique skill and that may have made me stare for a bit...”

“Aaah! See! I knew it! You were eating her up with your eyes!”

“Eating her up?! Why are you using such a sexual phrase? ...Are you possibly... jealous?” Julius asks, wide-eyed. He looks kinda happy.

What? Jealous? Me? Jealous? *JEALOUS?!*

“I-I have no reason to be jealous! S-S-Save the st-stupid talk for your dreams! Stupid, Jul—” I was about to throw a Yo Mama diss out there, when my face collides with his broad chest.

“Elle.” Julius calls my name in a heartrending voice.

What’s going on? What’s going on? What’s going on? Why am I being hugged?!

What Laurent said flashes into my mind.

“Please think about how you feel the moment Master does the same thing I did to you. Consider how your feelings differ between me and him.”

How my feelings differ?

Wrapped in Julius’s arms, in his smell, my heart drums a beat and words escape me. He hugs me even tighter.

“I have something to tell you if we succeed in destroying the magic circle tomorrow. Will you hear me out?”

Encompassed in Julius’s strong arms, hearing his sweet whisper near my ear, I finally become aware of my feelings.

No. I was aware of them long ago. But I didn’t want to acknowledge them. Because I thought Julius would eventually fall in love with Aela...

Too embarrassed to speak, I wordlessly nod and nuzzle against his chest.

Interlude: A Certain Woman's Crafty Spell

I gently scoop up my baby who shares the same fiery red hair as the one I love. My beloved child who giggles when I sway her in my arms.

"You will surely become a beautiful woman like me. And very strong like him."

I think of this child's future as I feel her warmth pressed against my chest.

Who will she become in the future? What will she be like? What will she do?

Wonder though I may, I will never be able to see her grow up.

When the time comes, children are relinquished to the facility. Once they are handed over, not even the parents are privy to what will happen to their babes.

The children are ripped from their mothers, given another name, and raised without ever knowing their parents' faces. Of course, I was raised just the same.

I know that is normal for us. Even so...

"I have devoted my whole life to the Demon Lord. Surely he will forgive me this one sly move," I whisper and imbue a timed spell in my child's fiery-red eyes.

Children are given a different name the moment they are relinquished. When that happens, the person who will decide this child's name will be bewitched by this simple Mesmerize spell and want to name her Elle when they look into her eyes.

I cast a crafty little spell so that the day this child leaves the facility and I come across a girl with fiery-red hair named Elle, I will know that she is my child.

Act 5: Vanquish the Demon Lord

Chapter 12: The Road to the Inner Sanctum

THE fighting forces of Elle Village set out the next morning. I don't have to worry about the others because I left the village in the very capable hands of Jasper the Trembler and Laurent, two of our appointed Four Grand Magi.

Julius taught Laurent how to create protection and invisibility barriers, so I've given him the new title of Iron Wall Laurent—no, Absolute Protector of Elle Village Laurent.

I also asked Jasper in private to lead the villagers as the mayor of our glorious Elle Village in the event something happens to me. I can trust him. He is Jasper the Trembler for a reason.

With the village taken care of, everyone on Team Vanquish the Demon Lord teleported into Analia's royal capital through the magic circle.

We're currently floating just outside the entrance to the Demon Lord's castle on my magic carpet.

Everything from teleporting seven people and arriving in style on the flying carpet went off without a hitch thanks to Julius.

As for him, he has his poker face on even though we had that awkward moment last night. Kind of makes me hate him!

And speaking of last night, wasn't that conversation a clear death flag? It's bad luck!

I mean, I was too flustered to say anything at the time, but does he have to wait for the magic circle to be destroyed to tell me what he wants to say?! Shouldn't he have said it before we stare down death?! What's wrong with that? I want to know now!

Uh-oh. I've gotta stop working myself up before a mission. The final battle is about to begin. Today we vanquish the Demon Lord. I have to stay focused.

In the short time I take to put myself in the right mindset, Julius demolishes the castle defenses as soon as they come into sight.

Yep, that's the same barrier it took me days to disrupt when I snuck into the Demon Lord's castle. Julius brought it down with a snap of his fingers.

I'm starting to feel like Julius is the only person I needed to bring. But eradicating the magic circle would be too much of a burden on him alone. If you don't let the magic power accumulated in the magic circle out in spurts before you destroy it, it will explode in your face. One person needs to be in charge of releasing the magic and another has to defend against attack, or it's game over.

And to Julius it's just as concerning for Aela and me, the two key players in reviving the Demon Lord, to be out of his sight. He's quite the worrier.

Just like that, we arrive above the Demon Lord's castle in no time and can comfortably check out what's happening below without threat of the defenses tearing us out of the skies.

"It's crawling with people," I observe, peeking over the side of the carpet.

Palace sentinels serving under Regulus normally guard the area around the castle, but there's an unusually large number marching the perimeter today. There are so many soldiers it makes me wonder if the entire squad is on duty today.

"Hrm. It seems that the elite guard I trained has assembled at the castle. Likely to stop our invasion. They're smart men. They knew we were coming," Regulus says with a hint of pride for the guards and their coordinated march around the castle.

"We won't get anywhere if we don't do something about those kids first...," Sereniel says in a restrained voice. "How do you want to handle them? With our strength, we could rout them with ease, but..."

We have Julius on our side, and with the awesome me and my mastery of wide-area spells, we can drive out the enemy like sheep. But they are innocent Analians...

"Don't fret," Regulus says when I'm too torn to decide. With absolute confidence, he asserts, "They were originally my troops. They will listen to this

old man.”

Right. Regulus used to command the elite guard until just recently! Routing the enemy is a piece of cake, but that doesn't mean I want to hurt people who don't know any better.

I smile encouragingly at Regulus. “Okay, I'll leave persuading them up to you, Regulus!”

He gives me two thumbs-up, flashes a grin to say he's got it, then leaps off the edge of the magic flying carpet. He drops down, not caring that we are hovering over the clouds, and lands with an earthshaking thud.

Guards rush to the loud noise.

Regulus swings his arms around, trying to explain the situation to them, and they flock to him in noisy droves as if welcoming him back and restrain his arms and legs in the process.

...Wait what?

“Hey, did Regulus just get apprehended?” I say, giving my honest appraisal of the scene unfolding below.

Aela peers over the side. “It looks that way,” she says, worried.

I watch for a while until Regulus looks up and sends his thoughts into my mind. (*Sorry, I failed ☆ Tehe!*) He laughs like a shy little girl and sticks out his tongue.

That old fart!

“Won't it be faster if I just lob this down there?” Julius asks. I look over at his right hand just as he makes a glowing sun orb appear. He plans to drop a sun on them?

C'mon, Julius! Stop taking the most violent option first! I'm totally on board with you, I am, but we can't do that!

“Goodness gracious, he can't do anything without me,” Sereniel says in exasperation and shrugs. “He's useless on his own, so I'll hold back the guards here for you. Julius, would you be a dear and make the carpet descend?”

Julius nods.

“Do you have a plan, Sereniel? Just to be clear, I am against any genius plan involving wiping out the area with magic like Julius wants to do,” I tell her.

“Who in the world do you think I am? Please don’t insult me by lumping me in with that barbarian. For I was formerly Analia’s second-ranked Grand Magi, Sereniel the Temptress.” No sooner does she speak than a sweet fragrance wafts from her. The tantalizing scent spreads around the castle perimeter.

This is one of the telepathic mind-manipulation skills she’s so good at!

I look to where Regulus is captured and see the guards who are restraining him standing in place with glazed eyes. Their hands slide from his arms and legs. Regulus is freed from their grasp and waves at us.

We land and I run over to his side and...kick him in the shins.

“Ow! What was that for, Elle?!”

“That’s my question! Oh my gosh, do you know how disappointed I felt when you jumped off like some cool hero and ended up caught a few seconds later?!”

Also, don’t go sticking out your tongue at your age!

“Now, now, Lady Elle. Let him off the hook. Our path into the castle is secured now,” Guido cajoles with a smile bright as dawn on a dazzling summer’s day.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Aela says with an equally heartwarming smile.

They don’t get it! If the former third-ranked Grand Magi sucks this bad, what does that say about me as the rank beneath him?!

“Hurry on inside,” Sereniel urges. “I will keep the guards in check, but my spell won’t last forever. You’ve got about two hours tops.”

Now that she mentions it, spells cast over an entire castle won’t last long before they drain the user dry of magic.

Suddenly, I see someone move in behind Sereniel while we’re talking...!

“Sereniel! Behind you!” I shout.

The assassin swings their dagger down on Sereniel’s back. *It’s too late!* I think just as a loud *bam* reaches my ears.

“Disrespectful youngling, attacking a lady from behind,” Regulus scolds.

He stood to protect Sereniel from danger. About ten feet away from him is the hooded figure he bunted away, a poisoned dagger clutched in their hand.

It looks like Regulus saved Sereniel. So he can be useful when the time comes! If he can pull that much off, maybe I can appoint him as one of the Eight Divine Generals of Elle Village.

“One of the DemiOracles,” Julius murmurs after walking up to the defeated assassin and checking its face.

One of the DemiOracles? They can leave the castle? I didn’t know that.

“You said they’re the Demon Lord’s homunculi, right? My magic doesn’t seem to work on them,” Sereniel says, disgusted.

That means her magic won’t work on Clark’s homunculi, either.

Regulus looks back at me. “In any case, this changes nothing—we still need to hurry into the castle and bring a swift end to this battle. Go take care of it while the guards are bound by Sereniel’s spell. I will protect her here. The guards will come after you if anything happens to her,” he says, coming across a tad cooler than usual.

Relief washes over Sereniel’s face knowing that Regulus will stay with her.

“Okay. You better protect Sereniel to the end! If you do that, I’ll officially appoint you as Old Gray of the Eight Divine Generals of Elle Village!”

“Hah...Old Gray...?” Regulus mumbles under his breath, as if he doesn’t like my choice of names.

Sereniel bursts out laughing. “Pft! Come on! Why Old Gray? You have horrible naming sense, Elle. And for your information, Regulus used to have hair as red as you. He was called the Crimson Demon in his heyday, so think up a better name for him.”

What’s wrong with my naming sense?! Old Gray sounds like a superhero name to me!

I gape at Sereniel, waiting for a better reason why that’s a bad name, but she waves me away.

“Think about it. Anyway, leave before you take up too much time here... Julius, take good care of Elle for me,” she insists for good measure.

“You don’t have to ask,” Julius responds forcefully.

“Your worry is wasted on me! After all, I am the glorious Elle Village’s grand sorceress mayor! I’ll roast, toast, ghost, then post Clark in a jiffy, then scare, tear, and flare that stupid magic circle!” I declare in a voice that could reach the mountains.

A gentle smile softens Sereniel’s face, transforming her from a coy woman into something more motherly. “...Say, Elle, I want to speak with you about something if we succeed in stopping the Demon Lord’s revival. So make sure you come back alive and well.”

She wants to talk about something? What is it? What’s with both her and Julius holding back what they want to say until everything is over?

Oh well. I can wait.

“Of course I will come back alive and well. After all, I am Elle Village’s grand sorceress mayor!” I exclaim and sweep into the castle in a swish of skirts, leaving the exterior perimeter in Sereniel’s and Regulus’s capable hands.

Invading the castle with me are Julius, Aela, Prince Guido, and Golem. We’re down to five. Our dream team is slowly being chiseled off. But to be honest, anything can be overcome as long as I have Julius on my side, so we’re still good.

“This is the Demon Lord’s Castle...,” Golem mutters, curiously taking in his surroundings.

Magic balls of light float in the air, creating a mystical backdrop. It probably drives home that we are no longer in Gaea.

Guards litter the inside of the castle, too, but we walk right past them because they are stupefied by Sereniel’s spell.

After advancing deeper into the castle, I suddenly hear a girlish giggle.

“Kyahaha!”

I stop. This voice...

“L-Lylish...?” Aela stammers, her voice trembling.

Lylish is laughing. And it’s not just one set of laughter but all sorts going “Kyahaha” “Ufufu” “Hehehe” from every direction. Dozens of wings are flapping around us.

I search the area and see nothing.

She’s using manga Lylish’s specialty: Invisibility!

I immediately cast Dispel Magic, and like a curtain dropping, what we hadn’t seen before becomes visible. Dozens of fairies have encircled us without our knowledge—we’re surrounded by Lylishes.

They face us with plastered-on smiles that don’t reach their dead, green eyes.

“It’s me, Lylish! Your name is Aela? What a great name!”

“Aela! This way! Come here!”

“Hey, Aela? Why don’t we save this kingdom together?”

“Come with me!”

“Aela, I love you!”

“Be confident in yourself! God chose you as his saint, after all!”

“Cheer up, Aela. You can do it!”

“I’ll protect you, Aela!”

They are all saying encouraging words in cheerful voices, but their eyes are devoid of emotion.

And I hate to say it, but repeating the same lines with the same face is horror-movie territory.

While we’re standing still trying to grapple with the scene straight out of a horror flim involving multiple Lylishes, a single Lylish charges straight at Prince Guido.

Crap! Now’s not the time to be freaked out by terrifying fairies!

No sooner do I think that than Golem deftly draws his sword and cuts down an incoming killer fairy.

Sliced cleanly in two, the pieces just so happen to plop on the ground in front of Aela. The sight is too intense for the girl who spent years calling the fairy friend, and she shrieks in horror. “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOoooooooooooo!”

Aela sways on her feet and tumbles forward. Guido rushes over and catches her before she hits the floor.

“I-I’m sorry, Your Highness! I acted without thinking about how she would feel...! How is Lady Aela?” Golem asks as he fends off several Lylishes’ ramming attacks with his sword and shield.

“Don’t worry. She just lost consciousness,” Prince Guido answers, brushing the hair off her face to make sure she is okay. I catch a glimpse of how stark white her skin is.

“Are you all right?!” I ask and try to get closer, but another set of Lylish horrors singing “Aela! Aela, Aela, AELA! Hey, Aela!” zoom in to block my path.

Smiling with eyes as blank as glass beads seriously gives me the heebie-jeebies. I’ve never been able to handle scary stories involving dolls!

Before I can react, the Lylishes turn into popsicles and drop to the floor with a thunk.

“Elle, don’t leave my side,” Julius says, coming over to protect me.

His magic iced our fairy menace, but I’m still worried about Aela...! I look over to Guido and see Aela awake in his arms. She’s reaching for the Lylish Golem cut in half.

“My magic didn’t work on her. She told me it was because she’s a fairy, and I believed her. But that wasn’t true, was it? She was a homunculus. A doll created by a man called Clark... That’s why my powers couldn’t save her... Prince Guido, please, oh please, put our dear friend to rest,” I hear Aela say clearly over the ensuing battle between Golem, Julius, and the swarm of Lylishes.

“...I will,” Guido vows, rising and drawing his magic sword. He holds it in front of him with both hands. “Spirits of Light, give me power...,” he chants and stands in a meditative stance for a few long moments before his eyes snap open. “Shining Flash!”



Th-This is Prince Guido's ultimate move that he acquires in the last half of the manga!

Blinding light shines from Guido, forcing my eyes shut.

It's so bright! Actually, now that I see it in real life, couldn't the author have come up with a cooler ultimate skill name? Isn't this too simple and literal?!

Guido awakens Shining Flash right before a boss battle toward the end of the series. I open my eyes when I stop sensing the flash's shining effect.

All the Lylishes zooming through the air are gone.

Shining Flash was described in the manga as a spell to eradicate evil.

In the latter half of the story, it's very effective against the homunculus that Clark controls, but isn't the concept of "eradicates evil" too vague?

Well, I'm on the side of justice, so I can't be eradicated— Ah, what about Julius?!

I spin around searching for Julius and am filled with relief to find him standing there unerased.

Phew! The spell didn't count Julius as evil.

"Was that Dispel? And a very powerful form of it at that," Julius observes with great interest as Prince Guido sheathes his sword.

Shining Flash falls under the Dispel skill tree? Huh. Looks like it has nothing to do with eradicating evil. The author lied!

"Hearing that from you gives me a confidence boost." Guido smiles and lends Aela a hand as he helps her stand. "Aela, I put Lylish to rest."

"...Thank you...very much. Prince Guido. Forgive me...for requesting such a cruel task of you," Aela says, crying. Guido hugs her.

"The weakling that I am, I could not bear to see Lylish like that a moment longer..." Aela continues through her tears. "She was just a puppet and may have thought nothing of us, but I...enjoyed being with her. Maybe her smile was fake, but still...it cheered me up."

"Yeah. She meant something to us," Prince Guido says comfortingly, rubbing

her back.

“I will surely remember Lylish every time I see a beautiful sky, feel a pleasant breeze, and gaze up at the twinkling stars. I will remember her cheerful voice, adorable smile, and this sinful day I had her erased. And each time I remember, I will pray that her soul rests in peace... Prince Guido, please forgive me for praying for a soul that served the Demon Lord.”

“It’s all right, Aela. I’ll pray, too. I will pray at your side, right next to you, sharing the same sentiment. Let me do that.”

Aela and Guido mourn Lylish’s loss in each other’s arms.

Since I read the manga, I can’t help shedding a tear when I see the bond between them. A silent tear streams down Golem’s cheek, too, as even he is affected.

The emotional moment is shattered by Julius’s cold voice. “We don’t have time for that. Keep moving.”

Julius rushes down the hall ahead of us, declaring an abrupt end to the emotional mood.

Well, he isn’t wrong about the need to keep moving, but does taking a few moments to grieve really set us back that far?!

I’m not willing to leave yet, but the two most affected people set aside their feelings, say “Okay!” and chase after Julius without a fight.

Chapter 13: Clark's Impetus

WITH nothing else in our way after the Lylish swarm, we finally arrive at the inner sanctum where the Demon Lord's magic circle awaits.

All things considered, we did that fast. Clark hasn't shown himself, either. Maybe he's too scared of Shining Flash inflicting the ultimate blow on his homunculi to come out now!

"The magic circles drawn all over this room are the Demon Lord? Incredible. I don't know much about magic, but even I can tell this is an amazing piece of work," Guido marvels.

I understand how he feels. I was awed when I first saw the room, too. Though my awe quickly turned to sorrow when I learned that this magic circle was all there was to the Demon Lord.

"The Demon Lord can't revive if we destroy this room, right?" Golem asks, gazing up at the biggest circle on the ceiling and the walls.

Julius shakes his head. "Not quite. We have to disperse the magic stored in the circles first. Destroying the room before we do that will stir up an enormous amount of power and runs the risk of causing a magic malfunction throughout Analia."

"A magic malfunction...?" Golem echoes.

"Yes. You have seen firsthand how an emotional sorcerer loses control of their magic, causing storms or freezing things by accident, right? The same applies to large-scale magic circles: losing control of the magic stored inside causes huge accidents. And this room is full of magic circles with powers beyond our understanding. The destruction it will cause will be on a whole different scale."

I, along with the rest of our group, gasp at Julius's grim warning.

"I see. How long will it take to release the magic accumulated in them?"

Prince Guido asks.

“Not too long,” Julius tells us. “Can you guard the room while I release the magic? The central circle is deeper inside. I will do it there—”

Instead of advancing farther inside, Julius stops. I look ahead of him. There, a despicable person stands in the dark with a sneer.

“Clark!” I shout. Nervous tension courses through the others.

“Oho? Everyone came together. How cute. I was waiting for you. Well, if things went how I wanted them to, I was hoping everyone would die on the way, leaving just Elle and Aela. Oh well.”

“Too bad your plan failed. We don’t play by your rules,” Guido says, drawing his magic sword. Golem is right there at his side. Aela stands behind them, anger simmering in her obsidian eyes.

“Going to fight here? You’ve lost your mind. The Demon Lord’s magic circles are all around you. Accidentally destroying the circles will cause a magic explosion,” Julius warns in a tight voice that only widens Clark’s crooked smile.

“Yes, it will. It’s a big risk. But the greater the experiment, the greater the associated risk. I am quite all right with forfeiting my life to develop magic to new heights.” No sooner does he finish speaking than Clark doubles.

There’s two Clarks? No, three? Four...? He’s multiplying!

“It’s easy with the homunculus magic circle active,” he explains as if it’s no big deal. I thought this back with the Lylish swarm, but it’s super creepy seeing a bunch of people with the same exact face surrounding you!

“I’ll get rid of him with the magic sword’s power...!” Prince Guido steps forward, but Julius throws out his hand to stop him.

“You can’t. Your power is immense but affects too wide of an area. There’s no going back if something happens to the magic circles.”

“Damn it...!” Prince Guido scowls.

“Were you waiting here to make it so we couldn’t fight you at our full strength?! You piece of shit!” Golem curses, drawing his sword in a screech of metal and bringing it down on the multiplying Clarks. His sword slices through

the homunculi like butter. Golem raises his sword.

“But you’ve looked down on the wrong person! I am Royal Guard Captain Golem in service to Gaea’s third prince, Guido! I don’t use flashy skills to fight! I’ll cut down your multiplying homunculi the good ol’ fashioned way!”

Oh my gosh, Golem, you’re so cool!

Golem has no magic, which is exactly why he can fight without holding back in this room of sensitive magic circles. We might be able to win if we support Golem until he can take down Clark’s real body with his sword skills...!

“Oh, yuck. I hate the hot-blooded type. So stifling,” I hear Clark’s breezy voice say, and his homunculi suddenly change directions. They are running over and gathering around his true body...?

“Golem, behind you!” Prince Guido shouts.

Golem pivots out of the way.

The homunculi he had sliced in half melted into some sort of gelatinous substance and surged into the spot where he was just standing with tremendous force.

At first I thought it was trying to attack Golem, but it’s not. The gelatinous blob is rushing over to Clark as well.

The heck? What once took human form melts and covers Clark’s body. To put it lightly, it’s freaking disgusting, but what’s the point of it?

“What are you trying to do?!” Prince Guido yells.

A small chuckle comes from Clark, who has become who-knows-what after so many homunculus blobs have grown over him. “Haha. What, you ask? These homunculi are, well, for my defense.”

“Your defense?” Aela’s nervous voice rings clearly through the noise.

“Yes. I need to protect myself because I am about to cause the greatest magic disaster in Analia’s history.”

“You can’t be serious!” Julius shouts.

I haven’t quite digested what Clark is planning. But the second I see

something like a hand reach out of the indescribable monster he has become for the nearest magic circle, it clicks.

Clark is gonna force the magic circles to implode?!

“Nooooooooooooooooo!” I shout, but it’s already too late. Clark’s blob hand shines on the magic circle.

“Elle...!” I hear Julius call my name. His arms wrap protectively around me. “Please don’t miss the true nature of your power.”

I hear his voice near my ear, and then the world whites out.

Chapter 14: In a Weathered World

FSSSSH.

I'm touching something sandy with my right hand. I can hear the dry rustle of grains slipping through my fingers.

When I fearfully crack open my eyes, an unknown world is before me.

Destroyed buildings, a layer of white grit covering the ground, and something hugging me from behind...

Slowly, I sit up, and whatever was hugging me crumbles away like a sandcastle being taken out to sea by the waves.

When I lower my gaze to what fell apart, there's a pile of white sand. I reach for the familiar face on top.

Jul...ius.

Julius's pale face is there, buried in the sand.

His beautiful long, golden hair flutters in the wind.

His handsome face is at rest with a peaceful expression, his ice-blue eyes forever closed to the world.

I run my finger down his cheek; it's still soft and warm. But there's nothing past his neck... No, to be exact, the section from his neck down is progressively turning to sand.

The sand gradually erodes Julius. If this goes on, even his beautiful and peaceful face will turn to dust...

Surreal. None of this feels real.

I mean, how could it? This...this shouldn't be possible...

I scour my memories to figure out what caused this, and then it comes flooding back into my mind—the magic explosion caused by destroying the

Demon Lord's magic circles.

Oh, I think with an out-of-place calmness. The uncontrollable magic caused the world to weather.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! Prince Guido! Sir Golem! Please open your eyes! Oh, please!"

I spin toward the sound of someone wailing.

Aela is staring down in horror at Guido and Golem eroding at her feet. Golem's lower half has turned to sand. Prince Guido is in a similar state, but both his arms are also missing.

I lift my gaze and see a single sword thrust in the sand. Two hands are clasped around the hilt.

They cling to the sword as if they have become one with it. The hands hold on tight, even though they have been severed from the arms, shoulders, and torso that give them strength.

That's Prince Guido's magic sword. Cracks are running through its blade. One look at that and I know Prince Guido and Golem protected Aela in the face of inevitable death.

Just as Julius protected me...

Are Sereniel and Regulus all right? No. They can't be. No one is safe after such a powerful magic circle blew up. They have fallen somewhere in this weathering world, becoming one with the sand as time passes...

"The Demon Lord's magic circle didn't fail to live up to its name! That explosion of magic! That power! You could even call it beautiful! Wouldn't you agree, Elle, Aela?"

I hear an overly excited, crazed voice that doesn't suit this quiet, dusty world.

"Boy, am I happy camper! I am so thrilled it worked out. It really was a gamble. Thank the Demon Lord I had faith it'd work! I knew I could believe in Julius to save Elle and in Guido and Golem to protect Aela. The power of faith is stupendous! What can I say, I'm impressed. Thank you so much for dying for me!" Clark rattles on like a lunatic and staggers to his feet with a wicked gleam

behind his cracked glasses.

There's something extra unsettling about his looks. He's missing his right arm.

"Oh? Ah, looks like I had to pay the price for using my arm to destroy the circle, after all. Guess I failed to block the entire explosion. If this happened to me, then the DemiOracles must have turned to instant sandcastles." Clark dismisses the loss of his arm as if it's not a big deal and laughs like he's having the time of his life.

Rage like I've never experienced before explodes within me. "CLARK! Why! Why did you do this? Wasn't reviving the Demon Lord your goal?"

If all the DemiOracles became sandbags, there won't be any blood left to revive the Demon Lord. And even in the off chance a DemiOracle survived, with the magic circle necessary to resurrect the Demon Lord obliterated, there's no way to revive him!

"Hmm? Did I say that? Well, I certainly respect the man behind the magic circle. But my goal isn't the Demon Lord's resurrection. Haven't you figured it out yet? I am solely interested in the act of reviving someone with magic. Taboo magic that rules over life and death. All I want to do is witness it in action."

"That's why you killed everyone?!" I scream, steaming hot winds roaring to life around me.

"Aaah, don't do that, Elle. Letting your magic loose will hurt Julius's and the gang's corpses," Clark advises with a grating laugh. I don't get what's so funny.

I bite my lip.

Am I frustrated? Angry? Sad? I don't know, but I feel like I'm about to lose my mind. And I don't want to hurt Julius's peaceful face, so I grit my teeth and force my magic to subside.

Clark shifts his crazed gaze to Aela. "All right, your turn, Aela dear. Pray for healing, with Elle's heart as the magic offering. Doing that will bring back the two gentlemen weathering away at your fingertips and Julius."

"I can...bring...them back...? But they are— Everyone is dead," Aela answers Clark's temptation in a threadbare voice.

“No, no. Don’t you listen? Your healing magic is powerful enough to revive the dead as long as you have an unlimited supply of magic,” Clark explains with delight.

Finally, I understand what he’s been after. If Clark’s sole objective is to witness the moment the dead are brought back to life, then it doesn’t matter if it’s the Demon Lord who is resurrected.

All along his goal was to wipe out everyone we cared about to create an environment that compelled Aela and me to do what he wanted.

“Elle...I...I...” Aela’s voice shakes. Fear-filled eyes stare at me.

Sweet and kind Aela doesn’t know what to do. She’s torn over whether she should rip out my heart and offer it up to save countless lives in return.

“What is there to hesitate over, Aela? You know what the correct answer is. You will choose a hundred lives over one, and a thousand lives over a hundred. For you are the saint. The holy heroine. Lylish raised you to make the right choice.”

Crystalline teardrops spill from Aela’s wavering eyes, and she hangs her head. But only for a moment, before she looks up at me. Determination blazes from her.

“E-Elle! I-I...I’m sorry! I...I...! I want to save everyone...!” she cries between sobs.

I know. I understand, Aela.

Aela wants to exchange my heart for everyone to come back to life. But I am not a part of that “everyone.” I am the offering for the revival spell she is about to use.

Spells don’t work on the “offering.” After all, magic activates in exchange for said offering.

I smile at Aela, who is suffering over having to make this decision.

“It’s okay. I want the same thing. Just giving up my heart will bring them all—” I say, bringing my right hand up to pierce it into the left side of my chest. But then someone grabs my wrist...or at least it felt that way.

But no one is holding my wrist. It's just my imagination. I chalk it up to simply that.

Though I tell myself that, for some reason, I've lost the impulse to rip out my own heart.

Am I unwilling to let go of life? Am I afraid to sacrifice my heart for others?

No. That's not it.

I can feel my heartbeat.

...Julius tried to tell me something in his final moments.

"Please don't miss the true nature of your power."

Those were his final words. I rely on what he said to recall what happened back in Laurent's old village. I pull on the memory of the moment Julius noticed my special ability.

I used an amplification spell that increased the amount of mist and healing magic to extend the effects of the healing elixir I had received from the DemiOracle to the entire village.

When he saw me increase the DemiOracle's healing magic contained within the elixir, Julius said I could become a perpetual magic generator.

Because I can increase magical power with magical power.

If my infinite supply of magic is due to the nature of my magical power, then... Julius's theory is fundamentally different from Clark and the Demon Lord's.

Magic is produced with our blood. The heart processes that blood. Therefore, the heart is the source of magic.

Therefore, the Demon Lord thinks that my heart is capable of producing an endless supply of magic.

The Demon Lord assumes that if my heart is sacrificed, Aela will obtain infinite magical power and become capable of bringing back the dead.

That Demon Lord, who drew a room of extraordinary magic circles, interpreted my power in such a way.

But what if his interpretation was wrong?

My heart isn't producing an infinite supply of magic. My power is the ability to increase and amplify the magic around me. I mean, Julius said that from the start.

The person I believe in, who I think is the greatest in the whole wide world and is the strongest man to live, isn't some stupid dead demon lord.

I, the grand sorceress mayor of Elle Village, view only one person as the greatest and strongest in the world, and it is him I'd be happy to appoint as assistant mayor—and that's Julius.

And the Julius I believe in said my power is the ability to amplify magic.

In that case, if that really is the case...then...I...!

I slowly rise.

Clark, who has been suspiciously watching us, scrutinizes me.

"Clark, I will show you just what you want to see: the powers of Elle Village's most glorious mayor, Elle!" I proclaim in a loud and clear voice.

"Elle?" Aela calls, staring at me in a daze.

"Aela, use your magic."

"But...my power alone...isn't enough to bring back the deceased...!"

"It's okay. Believe in me! After all, I am the youngest and prettiest girl to become one of Analia's Four Grand Magi, and the founder of the great and awesome Elle Village! I am the absolute ruler of Elle Village, served by the Four Grand Magi: Jasper the Trembler, Iron Wall Laurent, Legendary Chef Meide, and Too Cute Canna. I am also the strategist in the midst of the genius plot to install Old Gray Regulus and Big Boobs Sereniel as two key members of the Eight Divine Generals! And...and..." I stop to take a breath and Julius fills my thoughts.

"And I am Grand Sorceress Elle, who will absolutely, positively, assuredly, *definitely* bring back Julius...bring back the person I love and everyone we lost!" I declare, looking Aela straight in the eyes.

She has stopped crying and is staring at me wide-eyed. She looks kinda shell-shocked. But it doesn't take long before she speaks.

“That’s right. You want to save them just as bad as I do. I will put my trust in you, Elle! Because we are the same. We are just two normal girls who want to save the people they love no matter what!” Aela says with a smile and a big nod.

She closes her eyes and puts her hands together in prayer.

Then a greenish magic aura appears around her.

This is it. This is the magic.

I recognize the cue and draw a magic circle in the sand at my feet. It’s a spell to summon a gentle breeze.

May this breeze carry Aela’s spell far, far away until it gently encompasses every lost soul caught up in the magic circle’s blast.

And then I release the magic inside.





I remember my past.

I was a failure. I sucked at manipulating magic, and I lost control of every spell I learned, causing horrible accidents.

But I so badly wanted the Demon Lord to praise me that I practiced my butt off in secret. Keeping at it every day, I became capable of using spells that didn't require much precision.

I started to get the hang of it then. I could control spells better if I didn't use much magic.

From that time, I definitely learned how to cast spells differently from others. The truth is, I actually realized then that my magic was unique.

But I didn't want the Demon Lord to know.

I didn't want him to think of me as a failure. As *different*. I was the most content to do things like everyone else and be better than them at the *same* things. I wanted to be better in an ordinary way.

And just like that, the Demon Lord never tried to learn more about me. The real me.

So the magic circle and the man behind it never discovered my true power.



I smell grass.

Lured by that sweet, green smell, I open my eyes. An entirely different world extends as far as the eye can see. The buildings are still in shambles, but the ground, which had been an ocean of sand, is covered in lush grass.

And I hear someone breathing right beside me. I reach out my hand.

There I find Julius with a healthy complexion and a body that's not turning to dust.

I cup his cheeks in both hands. He's warm.

I press my ear against his chest. His heart is beating.

Julius...!

I look over my shoulder. Aela is curled up asleep on the grass, exhausted from using too much power.

Lying to her left and right are Guido and Golem, who have regained their limbs just as Julius has. All three chests rise and fall with their breathing.

Everyone's alive!

Tears spring to my eyes, but someone roughly latches on to my wrists and jerks me away from Julius. I look over and see shattered glasses and a cockeyed smile—Clark.

“Aaah! How splendid! Marvelous! Your power is on par with the gods! My whole body convulsed with delicious shivers! I was shaking from head to toe! I was especially surprised by Elle's unprecedented magical power. Oh, how could I have been such a fool! I nearly made the grave mistake of gouging out your heart. Determining the true nature of a power is one of the basics of being a researcher, too! I just assumed your power was what the Demon Lord said it was. Making subjective, baseless assumptions is a researcher's gravest sin! I'm ashamed to call myself a researcher. I'm so terribly sorry. I was in the wrong. I apologize. So, come with me, Elle! Please let me research you! I want to know everything about you!” With healthy pink cheeks, Clark speaks faster than a machine gun, his hands firmly locked around my wrists.

What the heck?! This guy is disgusting!

“Hey! Let go of me! You pervert!” I shout and swing down my arms to shake him off, but I can barely move.

What? Could this be...a magic shortage...?

In the brief time I'm reeling in shock from my first taste of a magic power outage, Clark drags me by the wrists to who knows where—seriously, leave me alone!

“Stop.” I hear someone demand the same thing I'm thinking.

“GUEH!” Clark, who has been talking his head off nonstop, croaks like a crushed frog and stops dead in his tracks.

His healthy complexion instantly turns blue.

Frost forms on the top of his head with a crunching sound.

He freezes like an ice sculpture with his mad-scientist smirk frozen in place. His hands feel colder than ice on my wrists.

Only one person controls ice like this.

“Julius!”

Julius slowly rises from where he had been sleeping on the grass. And when he comes over and touches Clark, the mad scientist cracks and crumbles onto the ground in a pile of ice cubes.

“Don’t touch Elle with your filthy hands,” Julius snarls down at the ice pile, then mutters, “This is...”

I don’t hear the rest because I’m so relieved Clark has turned to ice cubes that the strength goes right out of my legs and I fall back on my bottom. Ow.

“Elle! Are you all right?!” Julius kneels beside me and puts his arm around my back to help me stay upright.

“Yeah. I’m okay. Just that once I felt safe, I couldn’t stand anymore...,” I explain.

“I see,” he says with a gentle smile.

Emotion overwhelms me and tears overflow in the process... How could they not?! I mean, I mean, it’s Julius!

“Julius...!” I throw my arms around him and make sure of his warmth and heartbeat.

He’s warm!

He’s moving!

He’s alive!

“Elle... I’m so proud of you.”

I hear his gentle voice over my head, and then he hugs me.

I nod repeatedly with my head nuzzled against his warm chest.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Julius. You noticed me. You saw me...”

“Yes, I did. I have looked at you and only you since the day we met, Elle. Your smile, your angry face, your tears, all of you is so precious to me, I couldn’t look away,” Julius confesses, his voice a tad hoarse.

I slowly lift my head from his shirt. Julius is looking at me with kind eyes. I’m reflected in those icy-blue pools.

“Back when I lived in Analia, I never thought I would become this way. I didn’t know how greedy I was.”

“You’re greedy...?” I tilt my head.

“Yes. There’s so much I want to do. So much that I hope for, Elle.”

“...Hmm? What do you want to do?”

“From now until the end of time, I want to see your smile as the closest person to you. I want you to cry into my chest when you are sad. And it is my hope that I am the only one to ever be reflected in your beautiful ruby-red eyes... See? I’m greedy. People become so greedy when they have someone they love.” Julius looks refreshed to have laid out his true feelings.

My heart does a little flip.

“Someone you love...?”

“Elle, I love you. I love you with all my heart. I wanted to tell you how I felt after we took care of everything else. I am so glad I was able to. Thank you, Elle.”

Julius says all these things without getting embarrassed, which makes me embarrassed, but also happy. The tears that finally stopped are rushing to my eyes again.

I bury my face in his chest.

I have to tell him! I have to share my honest feelings! Tell him that I love him, too...!

I pull back from his chest and glare up at his handsome face. “I...I also...about you...well...how do I say it...?”

The words lodge in my throat. I mean, Julius is staring super-duper hard at me!

But I'll say it! I will! I'll tell him!

For I am Elle Village's esteemed mayor! I'll make him know my love!

"J-J-Ju-Ju-Julius! I...I...I a-also..."

OH MY DEMON LORD! I'm too embarrassed to say *I love you*!

And I'm the girl who boldly announced to everyone I met in Analia that the Demon Lord loves me and I love the Demon Lord!

When did I become such a spineless coward?!

Say it! Spit it out! Come on, me!

Show him that Elle Village's mayor has a spine!

"J-J-Ju-Julius! If that's how you feel, th-th-then I, th-the grand sorceress mayor of Elle Village, d-don't mind m-making you m-my h-h-husband!"

Gah! Who the heck do I think I am, saying I don't mind making him my husband!

Oh, right, I'm Elle Village's esteemed grand sorceress mayor Elle! I'm grand and esteemed, so I get to be arrogant!

Wait, wait. Did I just jump the gun? Saying he can be my husband... I totally just skipped all the steps like becoming boyfriend and girlfriend first!

Calm down, girl!

In a complete and total panic, I nervously wait for Julius's response. Astonishment fills his wide eyes. But a smile sweeter than Chef Meide's sweetest desserts instantly spreads across his face.

"Pft. I didn't expect you to propose to me first. I'm thrilled. I accept, my adorable Elle," Julius says, leaning in close. Something soft presses against my lips, and we kiss.

Epilogue

IT'S been a few months since we destroyed the Demon Lord's magic circle.

The explosion Clark caused by destroying the magic circle wiped out Analia's royal capital. Thanks to Aela's powers, there was no loss of life. Everyone was revived by our joint spell.

But without the guidance of the Demon Lord's magic circle, Analia has become a kingdom without a purpose.

So Sereniel and Regulus became representative leaders of the people to prevent Analians from falling into the chaos of having no ruler. They are working hard to rebuild the country.

Aela made a triumphant return to Gaea with Prince Guido and Golem, trumpeting the news of the Demon Lord's defeat.

Thus, the long war between the Kingdom of Gaea and Analia has come to an end. That said, with the conflict over, it's been rumored that Gaea has become embroiled in succession wars within the royal family and various other political chaos, so it seems Prince Guido's real fight starts now.

As for me and Julius, we returned to our beloved, glorious Elle Village together.

Rebuilding the village was our first course of action. Then tilling the fields, bundling straw bales, spinning thread to make clothes, caring for farm animals—there's a lot of difficult work, but I have been enjoying every peaceful day with the villagers.

"Elle!" Julius calls for me while I'm weaving with the village women. He's holding a letter. "We've received word from Sereniel."

"What? From Sereniel?!" I jump up and run over to him.

"It seems they have finished cleaning up most of the trouble in Analia and are

asking you to come spend time with them. What do you want to do?”

“I’m going!” I answer without delay. Julius smiles.

How nostalgic! I have no reason to refuse an invitation from fellow party members who helped vanquish the Demon Lord.

I’m super stoked about seeing them after all this time!

Plus, Sereniel said she wanted to talk about something if we succeeded in preventing the Demon Lord’s resurrection, but the opportunity completely slipped by because of the devastation the magic disaster wreaked on Analia.

Maybe this is my chance to fulfill the promise we made.



“**WOW**, things are pretty much back to normal!” I exclaim as I take in Analia for the first time since the explosion.

This is New Analia. The country Sereniel and Regulus are striving to rebuild.

Julius and I flew here straight away after receiving Sereniel’s invitation.

Last I saw it, it looked like a scene right out of a post-apocalyptic movie, with the endless sea of green and ruins, but now proper buildings have replaced the wreckage and people are going about their business.

Maybe it’s just me, but it seems like Analia has more life and activity than it did back when I lived here.

“Sereniel and Regulus are in that big mansion over there, right? Let’s go, Julius!”

“Okay.” Julius walks in step with me and casually takes my hand in his. What’s more, this is no ordinary hand-holding, but the kind where your fingers interlace! The Lovers’ Hold!

“J-J-J-Ju-Julius! D-Doing this kinda thing in public is...lewd, don’t you think?!”

“...I don’t recall doing anything so indecent to deserve being called lewd.”

Julius’s usual calm and collected voice rains down on me, helping me regain a modicum of calm in my moment of freaking out over acting like a couple.

H-He's right. I might have overreacted a bit. But...but...people are watching... and he did it out of the blue...! That's right! His abruptness is at fault!

"Sh-Shut up. Y-You're right. H-Holding hands isn't out of the ordinary or anything. We are married, after all... But! You catch me off guard when you do it without notice, so get permission first! Ask for permission from your wonderful Elle!"

"All right. Elle, may I continue holding your hand?" Julius asks, a slight smile pulling at his lips.

It puts me in such a good mood I give instant approval. "...Yep! You have my special permission to do so."

Hehe. Holding hands while walking through an unfamiliar city with Julius feels like a date!

"Oh my goodness. Did you hear what they just said, Regulus? They're so innocent. It's giving me hives. They're too pure for this world."

"Of course I heard, Sereniel. Such innocence. Their relationship is so squeaky clean."

I hear people talking behind our back. What's worse is that they keep mocking our relationship by calling us innocent this and innocent that!

I turn around and find two familiar faces.

"Oh? Sereniel? Regulus?!"

"We came to get you since we saw you land over here," Sereniel says, her arm hooked around Regulus's.

"Good to see you again. Is it all right for the country's two leaders to be on a leisurely stroll in these parts?" Julius asks, but I'm way more curious about something else entirely.

Aren't they too close? I mean, Sereniel is linking arms with Regulus and her breasts have practically swallowed his arm!

"On the public safety side, there's no issue with us going for a walk. You're about the only person in the world who can take the two of us on," Regulus responds with a dauntless smile.

Sereniel notices my suspicious gaze locked on her chest and grins. “That reminds me, I haven’t told you yet. Regulus and I actually got married, too.”

Her shocking confession causes the world to blur before my eyes. “Hah?! Married? The two of you are?! Since when did you become so close?!”

“Since when? Can’t really say. It just kind of happened naturally. Right, Regulus?”

“It did. We were always together and Sereniel is gorgeous.”

“Ooh, you! You make me blush. Well, it is a fact I’m gorgeous.”

Regulus and Sereniel are flirting in front of me.

Wait, is this for real?

Still in disbelief, I pester them about it. “Hey, are you serious?!”

I mean, it’s hard to believe.

“There’s nothing strange about it. Regulus and I had already been bound through an engagement vow.”

An engagement vow in Analia is essentially a huge event where couples selected by the Demon Lord have children together per his orders.

Julius and I originally met as betrothed under the Demon Lord’s orders, too.

Well, it makes sense. Basically, the Demon Lord was trying to produce stronger magic users through unions between the strongest sorcerers.

As two of the Four Grand Magi, Julius and I were selected as a couple for our excellence in magic. It makes plenty of sense that Sereniel and Regulus would be matched together for the same reason.

“I never knew. You guys were engaged, huh? We didn’t interact much as the Four Grand Magi, and I always thought you two hated each other.”

“Well, it’s a fact that our engagement vows ended a long time ago. We had a child and raised that child until they were old enough to go to the facility...and then we parted ways according to the rules. I had to leave both Regulus and our child.”

“Oh, right. Once you have a kid together in Analia, that’s it for your

relationship. And your engagement period only lasts so long before it automatically terminates even if you don't have any kids— Hang on, you guys had a kid together?!”

“Why, of course we did. I gave birth to an adorable child who's just like me.”

Er, how old is Sereniel right now? She has been the second-ranked Grand Magi for as long as I can remember. I never heard anything about her taking a break from her duties to have children.

“Back then, Regulus was the coolest man around. The gray-haired, subdued version is wonderful in his own way, but back in the day, he was the strongest man in all of Analia and the first-ranked Grand Magi with long, flowing fiery-red hair. I was in awe of him from day one. So when I received word from the DemiOracle that Regulus was selected as my fiancé, I got on my knees and swore allegiance to the Demon Lord all over again! Though that didn't last long, since we turned on the Demon Lord.”

“Wahaha! You're making me blush, sweetheart. Once you become the first-ranked Magi, the Demon Lord often assigns different partners for you to have children with, but Sereniel left the biggest lasting impact. She was a drop-dead gorgeous lassie. And her boobs were huge. Bigger than any other gal.”

Regulus and Sereniel are drifting into their own little gross flirtatious world again, but I'm more bothered by something they mentioned.

“Hey, Regulus, is it true that the Demon Lord assigns you lots of different women to have children with once you become the first-ranked Grand Magi?”

“That's right, lassie. First rank means you are the strongest man or woman in the kingdom. What better way is there to make powerful sorcerers than through the strongest's seed?”

Uh, I wonder if that means the first-ranked Grand Magi was basically the Demon Lord's studhorse in producing an endless supply of powerful sorcerers.

My eyes slowly rise to Julius's face.

“Hey, Julius? You were the first-ranked Grand Magi, too, right? Did you have other fiancées before me...?” I pose my sudden doubts as a question for Julius.

Julius answers my naïve and simple question with a nod, his beautiful blond hair sliding over his shoulders. “Yes,” he says honestly without a shred of guilt in his voice. “I believe there were three before you. But we were still at war. I couldn’t spend much time with them. The time limit passed without us having any children and we went our separate ways.”

I glare at him.

What the hell?! I’m super pissed off!

Noticing my enraged aura, Julius’s eyes spin and he rushes to correct himself. “If I said I was lying just now, would that make you feel better?”

“Hell no! Stupid Julius! Pervert! Cheater! Impure jerk! Hand! Let go of my hand!” I demand and peel his hand off mine.

Julius makes a face like the world just came to an end. “Elle, I will do anything to make it up to you. Anything at all, so please don’t say things like that.”

I turn away from him.

I mean, I understand that it’s not really his fault and those relationships happened before us, but it’s still upsetting! Because...

“Because...you’re my...first... Even though you’re my first ever, you had three women before me...and I don’t like that,” I accidentally say out loud. Julius staggers backward.

“What in the world is this? A new type of telepathic magic? You’re too cute; my heart can’t take it...”

This time it’s what he muttered that sends heat rushing to my cheeks. I mean, he keeps calling me cute!

“D-Don’t think you can easily repair my mood by calling me cute, buster!”

“I don’t. I was just speaking from the heart... But it will kill me inside if you hate me. Um, think of it like this: it’s also my first time emotionally, so there’s no issue for us.”

Hah? What kind of excuse is that? First time emotionally... Well, whatever. You can’t do anything about the past even if you try. Plus, he called me cute.

Learning about his previous relationships was a shock, but it's ancient history. I just won't let him get away with touching another woman now that he's with me.

But...it's still frustrating to think about. So it's only fair if I get to tease him a bit.

"I haven't started hating you because of it or anything, but I won't hold your hand again for the rest of the day!"

"No matter what I do?!"

"No matter what!" I declare firmly. Sadness washes over Julius's pretty face, and then he turns a peevish glare on Regulus.

"It's your fault that Elle is in a bad mood, you old coot. Do something."

"Julius, you should learn to respect your elders more."

"He's right. Are you sure you want to treat us this way? Don't you want to be accepted as our son-in-law?" Sereniel chimes in, interrupting the banter between Julius and Regulus.

Hmm? What's this about him being their son-in-law?

The same doubts crossing my mind flash across Julius's face. But he immediately puts together the pieces I'm missing.

"It can't be possible that the child between you and Regulus is...," he says and looks at me. Sereniel and Regulus are looking at me, too.

Wait, what?

"Sure is! Why haven't you noticed? Her unique flaming-red hair was inherited from Regulus. And her fiery spirit is similar to mine, right? For you see, Elle is my and Regulus's baby girl. Kyaha! I said it! It was illegal in Analia to tell your child that you're their parents, but the Demon Lord and his laws are dead!"

"Wha? Wha? WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

My astonished voice rings throughout Analia's capital after hearing the unbelievable truth about my birth parents.

As I'm trembling from the shocking truth that Sereniel and Regulus are my

mama and papa, Sereniel cheerfully suggests, “We have a lot to talk about, so let’s go to our new living quarters instead of chatting in the streets!”

I’m too stunned to move, so Sereniel leads me by the hand all the way to the parlor in the new manor built where the Demon Lord’s castle used to be.

Three familiar faces already occupy the room.

“Aela? Guido and Golem, too! You three came as well?”

Of all things, Gaea’s saint party is already sitting in the parlor.

“Elle! I’ve missed you so much! I had hoped we could see each other soon!” Aela openly rejoices over my arrival. She runs over to me and takes my hands, and we jump up and down together, overjoyed to be reunited once again.

Meanwhile, Julius and the men casually greet each other with “Good to see you” and “You too.”

Men can be so dry.

“It feels so nostalgic to gather our old party together.”

“Certainly does.”

Sereniel and Regulus are watching our reunion like an old couple getting emotional over seeing their grandchildren get together.

“You guys invited Aela, too?” I ask Sereniel over my shoulder.

Prince Guido reacts to my question with a wry smile. “No, she didn’t invite us. We came seeking aid.”

Seeking aid? What for?

I look back at Aela. Sadness permeates her smile.

“Did something happen?”

“Yes. A lot of problems have arisen over the crown and who is next to be king of Gaea...,” Aela struggles to tell me.

Guido continues in her place. “I’ve decided to take part in the battle for the crown. I want to show off that I have a deep connection with the new Analian government to give myself an extra edge in the fight for the throne.”

Prince Guido looks like a man who has made up his mind.

But this news comes as a surprise because Prince Guido never seemed like the type who was interested in becoming king. He had no interest in the manga storyline, either.

“That’s unexpected. I didn’t think you a man obsessed with the crown,” Julius softly says, echoing my opinion.

Golem groans. “His Highness is doing it for Lady Aela. The other candidates for the throne fear Lady Aela’s influence as the one who brought the long war to an end. If another royal becomes king, they will likely smear Lady Aela as a witch, and if the worst of them rises to power, they may even have her executed as a heretic.”

Golem’s bombshell news makes my eyes spin.

Seriously? I mean, is this for real?!

I search Aela’s face. She sorrowfully lowers her gaze to our hands.

“What the hell is with these idiots?! Are they freaking kidding? How could they toss her aside after they’re done using her like some sorta wet rag?! I’ll trap them in hell’s inferno and burn them alive!”

“Don’t get so fired up, Elle. Besides, you can’t use the same kind of magic you could before,” Julius reminds me. I purse my lips.

He’s right.

When I amplified Aela’s spell with my magic, I drained myself dry. I always unconsciously increased my own magic supply with magic, but I was so concentrated on amplifying Aela’s at the time that I couldn’t spare a moment to do the same for myself.

Doing so made me hit the bottom of my magic fuel can, so to speak. And after hitting bottom once, I’ve lost the mysterious ability to endlessly increase magic. At least so far.

I can use magic better than the average sorcerer still, but I don’t have the same supply that made it possible to cast huge area of effect spells that I was so fond of. On the bright side, I’ve become a master of spells that require

precision, which I epically sucked at before.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got plenty of magic left in me to fire off one or two explosions! ...I think,” I say to stop Julius from worrying, but he shakes his head.

“There’s no reason for you to push yourself, Elle. My power is your power. My everything belongs to you. If you wish it, I will turn everyone who annoys you into popsicles... But this is their problem, not yours,” Julius says, directing his gaze to Prince Guido.

“Exactly. Your offer means a lot to us, Lady Elle, but this is a trial we must face. We will do something about it ourselves.”

Hearing Prince Guido put it like that helps cool off the fire burning in me. When I really think about it, this is Gaea’s—Prince Guido’s fight—so we shouldn’t butt in for the heck of it.

But...

“If you say so. But we’re pretty fond of you guys. Or more like, I’d be happy to appoint you the title of honorary residents of Elle Village... And I think of you as fellow companions who helped us take down the Demon Lord. So make sure you tell me when you are in real trouble, okay?”

Aela gifts me with an angelic smile. “We will! Thank you!”

Hehe. Aela’s smile is the cutest. I’m still her biggest fan!

“With that said, we’ll start with Regulus and me lending you our names as the representative leaders of New Analia. We’ve become allies now that the war is over, but I will gladly threaten the noble fools that we will come for Gaea if anything happens to you kids. Simply put, use us in the best way possible to effectively protect your princess,” Sereniel says, handing Prince Guido a slip of paper.

Prince Guido accepts it and bows before them. “You have my gratitude.”

It looks like Saint Aela’s party still has a long ways to go before their stormy and drama-filled story comes to a close.



AFTER having our long-awaited reunion with everyone, we enjoyed a dinner

party at Sereniel's mansion until late in the evening, and then Julius and I returned to Elle Village well past midnight.

Elle Village is the picture of silence in the middle of the night.

Julius and I walk slowly along the dirt road of the pitch-black village, relying only on the light of the lamp.

I feel light on my feet after meeting with our old friends, hearing what they've been up to, and having a good laugh together.

And more than all of that, I was the most surprised by the secret of my parentage...

I never knew. Well, I did think that Sereniel picked on me and hung around me a lot for us being complete strangers.

Julius grabs my hand, disrupting my pensive thinking.

I glance up at him.

"The sun set and the date has changed. The day I couldn't hold hands with you is over. Now the day has come where I can hold your hand again," Julius says quickly as if he's making excuses for it.

What's all this about?

I search through my memories until I finally remember.

Oh yeah, I told him he couldn't hold my hand for the rest of the day because I was in a bad mood. I was in good spirits soon after that, so I completely forgot about it, but it seems like Julius didn't.

I lace my fingers through his and squeeze.

Some of the tension leaves his tight cheeks as though he's relieved I didn't reject him this time.

"I'm glad it's okay now. Thank you, Elle."

Julius is so precious that I say "I'm cold" and nestle up against him.

Hehe. It's chilly late at night. Besides, no one is around, it's dark, this is Elle Village, and that's the perfect setting for invincible Elle to become bold!

“Elle, I want you to know that...I’m sorry for hurting your feelings because of my other fiancées.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter anymore. Oh, but! I won’t forgive you if you start looking at other women now that we are a couple!”

“That will never happen,” Julius tells me with a small smile.

Hehe. Delighted to hear that, I give his hand another squeeze.

I love holding hands with Julius.

We decide to take a detour on the way home, so our stroll takes us to a nearby lake.

Snuggling up against Julius and just going for a walk during the still of night is...incredibly fun.

“...It’s strange, for some reason I feel the most free in this very moment,” Julius quietly murmurs as we’re enjoying our midnight ramble.

“Of course you do. We’ve long since defeated the Demon Lord and are living how we want to with everyone in Elle Village!”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s a piece of it, but I had a lot of authority in Analia. I knew that I could overcome most things with sheer power and was capable of doing anything without remorse if I thought it was on the Demon Lord’s order... But now I become a depressed mess when I can’t hold your hand and am executing restraint not to use my power for my friend because that is what is best for them. I’m sure my past self would find the way I currently swing from happy to sad over the smallest things the absolute opposite of free. But the me of now feels like I am experiencing the greatest freedom in the world,” Julius explains as the night breeze caresses our cheeks.

I can smell the chill of the cool night air and the earthy scent of my beloved Elle Village.

“I feel the same way,” I agree, and since it’s feeling colder, I nestle in closer. Julius is warm.

“The night breeze is cold. Take my coat,” Julius says, letting go of my hand to take off his coat. He faces me and drapes it over my back.

Surrounded by his warmth, I discover something insightful about what he just told me.

“Hey, Julius, guess what? I might’ve just come up with something awesome! What you just said makes a lot more sense and fits super well if you change out the word *free* with *happy*.”

Illuminated by the lamp in his hand, Julius thoughtfully rubs his chin, then nods.

“You’re right. It does. I see. So that’s the concept that was missing. It makes so much more sense now,” Julius exclaims, having fun with the new discovery, which makes him extra lovable to watch. “So when do you feel free?” he asks me.

“I’m the glorious Elle Village’s grand sorceress mayor. I’m free all the time! But if I had to say it, there are the occasional—really just occasional—moments where I feel a lack of freedom.”

Julius gives his head a concerned tilt. “When is that?”

“Well, you see, this is just an example, but like when I want to kiss you but can’t reach you... Like right now...”

How charming he’s being and the mood in the air gives me the courage to say bold things. Julius’s eyes bulge, but an affectionate smile immediately takes over.

“Elle, please don’t say such adorable things. I won’t be able to hold myself back... Close your eyes,” he says, placing the lamp on the ground. He leans over and caresses my cheeks in his hands.

I lift my chin and close my eyes.

The sensation of my love’s lips on mine and the warmth of his hands make me feel the greatest “freedom” in the whole universe.



After Story: Elle Village's Grand Sorceress Mayor Wants to Wreak Havoc in Gaea

THE teacup that fell on the floor and broke floats in the air and returns to its original shape, and the spilled tea flows back and up into the repaired glass. Then the tea-filled cup lands on the table with a clink.

The sweet, floral fragrance of steaming hot black tea fills the room as if nothing had happened.

Laurent is as impressive as ever. He just used a time reversal spell.

I'm honestly stunned by how smoothly he pulled off an advanced spell, but Julius shakes his head after watching the miracle.

"Not good enough. Take a closer look. There are holes in your magic circle," Julius says, pointing to the warped line in the magic circle Laurent drew in the air.

I guess there is a slight bend in the line?

"Ugh," Laurent groans and scrunches up his face. "But it gets the same result. I don't see a problem with leaving it like this."

"Laurent, you have too good of an eye for magic particles. Therefore even if your magic circle is distorted, you can still cast spells by subconsciously manipulating the particles. However, that won't work when you use multiple complex circles at the same time."

"Does that mean I am failing to cast spells with just a magic circle?"

"Exactly. You are talented, which is why you can do what normally can't be done. But relying on talent alone to get you through will only get you so far. Especially when it comes to the spell we want to pull off."

Julius's strict advice causes Laurent to heavily hang his head.

"I just can't get the hang of configuring circles..."

“Don’t let it get you down. You might struggle, but you have mastered a lot already. You won’t have any trouble if you focus on what you are drawing,” Julius says, giving a master-like smile.

Laurent glares angrily at both of us. “How do you expect me to focus...?”

“Why can’t you?” Julius inclines his head at the bitterness in Laurent’s voice.

“There’s no way I can in this situation...!” Laurent howls, unable to bear it a moment longer.

Oh dear. What in the world has him upset?

“What’s wrong, Laurent? Want to relax over a cup of tea?” I suggest, holding up the teapot from my perch on top of Julius’s lap.

“You are just as guilty, Lady Elle! Please think of how I feel watching you two flirt in front of me!” Laurent complains with tears in his eyes.

Apparently, he isn’t happy with me gracefully enjoying a cup of tea on Julius’s lap.

“Why don’t we take a break? I want to drink the sublime tea you brewed.”

Julius’s honey-sweet voice resounds directly over my head. I tilt my head back to see him smiling with an expression just as sweet.

Aw, shucks! Julius is pouring too much love on me! I’m blushing! But it’s all good. After all, we’re a married couple.

“That’s why I keep saying you guys are too clingy! There’s no man alive who could concentrate with you putting on a show like this!” Laurent shouts.

Oh dear, I wonder if he’s reached his rebellious phase.

“Lady Elle, please quit looking at me like you’re wondering if I’m in my rebellious phase!”

“What?! Did you finally master mind reading, Laurent?!”

“As if! ...Ugh, I’m too tired for this.”

“Elle, give him space. He’s at that age.”

“True. *That* age can be tough.”

“No, it has nothing to do with my age! Besides, you’re practically the same age as me, Lady Elle!” Laurent bemoans, nearly on the verge of tears.

Feeling bad for him, I hop off Julius’s lap.

“We’re just teasing, Laurent. Julius suggested we should flirt in front of you to help train your ability to concentrate. Apparently, this is a good way to improve your mental endurance,” I explain.

Laurent turns an even more vengeful look on Julius and growls, “Master...”

The master in question shrugs and says, “It’s a part of your training,” with an innocent smile.

But Laurent is more depressed than I thought he’d be. Maybe we took our teasing too far.

“Sorry, Laurent. Don’t cry. Come here and have some tea with me, okay?”

“Okay...”

“Oh, I know. Why don’t I ask Meide to make your favorite meal today? What do you want to eat?” I ask in hopes of cheering him up.

“Elle, don’t be so nice to him. You’ll give him a big head,” Julius objects. I can practically hear the pout in his voice.

“He deserves to have a big head. He’s that amazing of a sorcerer. He is one of Elle Village’s Four Grand Magi for a reason,” I say in Laurent’s defense.

“Lady Elle...!” Laurent cries, smiling brighter than the sun.

It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m fully aware of how amazing Laurent is. After all, in the manga, he’s the powerful sorcerer who wipes out Elle. On the other hand, if he wasn’t amazing, manga Elle would have no excuse for losing. So let’s just leave it at Laurent being amazing.

“You can say kind things about him because you don’t know impudent this little brat is. He’s watching like a hawk for an opportunity to replace me.”

“What? Replace you how? Like as Elle Village’s strongest Grand Magi? What’s wrong with that? Better for him to be ambitious than not to be,” I say, drawing an even sunnier smile out of Laurent, who has completely recovered from his

bout of depression.

“Lady Elle, thank you! But I’m not aiming to replace Julius in particular. Of course, I would love to become your number one, but I’m okay with number two,” Laurent openly shares.

“...I won’t allow a number two,” Julius curses under his breath.

“What are you boys fighting over? Elle Village has a second, third, and fourth, too. We are the Four Grand Magi, after all.”

“That’s not what we are talking about,” Julius sighs as if he’s been drained of life. Meanwhile, Laurent is in great spirits.

Sometimes these two have weird mood swings that are the complete opposite of each other, which I have a hard time understanding. There are also times when they converse about things in secret, and it seems like they are doing some sort of special spell research on the side.

I’m sipping my tea while thinking about their relationship when Julius’s eyebrow suddenly shoots up.

“Have you noticed yet?” Julius asks in a grim voice.

Laurent nods. “Yes. Someone has approached the village. This presence can only be...” He trails off, his brows snapping together.

It seems an unwanted visitor has come to Elle Village.



I never thought I’d have to see this despicable face again...

Our unwanted visitor is that perverted ratface who previously came as the seigneur’s messenger to extort an OUTRAGEOUS amount of land taxes from Elle Village!

He was apprehended during our last encounter, but nothing happened to him because things got hectic between Aela’s arrival and the Grand Magis’ assault. He seems to have shrewdly escaped during the chaos. Sly rat.

“It’s good to see you again. The last time we met, things went south for everyone, but I am relieved to see you and your village survived,” drawls the

lecherous deviant with a smarmy grin.

As always, his smile gives me the creeps.

Just like before, we've shown him to the visitor's parlor and are having Jasper the Trembler acting as the representative. Julius and I are hidden by invisibility magic again, but I have every intention of directly inflicting punishment if he does anything rude.

"It's been a while since your last visit, sir. What business brings you here? We have already paid the appropriate taxes without delay. Furthermore, Prince Guido is the current seigneur presiding over this region," Jasper says, cleverly cutting the messenger's legs out from under him before he can say anything.

Jurisdiction over Elle Village belongs to Prince Guido now. That said, he lives in the capital, so his appointed representative handles things on his behalf. And since this is someone Prince Guido picked, they're a decent person who rules with a fair hand.

Elle Village now pays the appropriate taxes determined after a proper discussion with the deputy seigneur.

"True enough. However, I know you must have unspoken issues with the new ruler. Am I wrong?" the ratfaced messenger asks with a suggestive grin.

"We have no issues. Only respect for being treated well," Jasper says, careful not to be led into saying the wrong thing.

"Yes, yes, I understand you completely. You needn't say it out loud. The third prince is a naïve, spoiled little boy. Surely he knows nothing of land management. He is even exploiting citizens out of their hard-earned crops. Don't you agree?"

"His taxes are paltry compared to the amount you suggested last time."

"I have good news for people who are struggling to pay such preposterous taxes. I come bearing a splendid deal that will make your entire village tax-exempt," the messenger suggests, brimming with confidence.

Yeah, but we don't have any complaints about our current seigneur! Jasper has been stressing that fact from the start, too. This dirtbag just doesn't listen.

Even Jasper, the talented negotiator that he is, lets the smile freeze on his face. Communicating with this man is near impossible.

The messenger drones on, unaware—or just uncaring—that Jasper isn't on the same page. "As I'm sure you already know, it was the witch in league with the third prince who destroyed this village last time," he says, spewing utter nonsense as though he's conveying some grave piece of factual information.

It's true that Elle Village was partially decimated during his last visit, but that was the work of Analia's Grand Magi.

"I managed to escape from the wicked third prince's henchmen, but my heart ached for what happened to this village afterward. Extraordinary effort must have been required to rebuild the village."

"Uh-huh," Jasper sighs.

"But instead of apologizing, the notorious third prince is squeezing the life out of this village with high taxes...! What a ruthless scoundrel he is!" the messenger laments.

Seriously, what is this guy after? Does he not notice that every single villager is apathetic to his spiel?

"As I have stated since the beginning, our taxes are fair. We are not dissatisfied. Furthermore, the ones responsible for partially destroying Elle Village are—"

"The former seigneur I serve is also grieved over Elle Village's desperate plight."

"Excuse me, but would you please listen—"

"Yes, yes. I understand. I more than understand and sympathize with how you all feel," he says, nodding like he knows everything we're thinking.

"So what is it you are trying to say?" Laurent asks outright, unable to put up with it a moment longer.

"Ooh! Why, if it isn't the local master sorcerer! Perhaps I have taken up too much of your time. Allow me to get straight to the point. Per the good offices of His Lordship, he is offering Elle Village the opportunity of becoming tax-exempt

upon his return to his former position.”

“Tax-exempt...?” Jasper repeats in a tired voice, sounding disinterested, although the effect is lost on Smiley the Messenger.

“Indeed. Upon one condition, however. The condition is...,” he starts, then goes on at length about the tax-exemption condition with a sickeningly sticky smirk.



“**WHY** did you accept that ridiculous offer?” I storm up to Julius the second after everyone else leaves the room to see the messenger off.

The perverted ratface came here to say, “We will make Elle Village tax-exempt if you succeed in assassinating the witch and the third prince.”

He switched out their names for *witch* and *third prince*, but he’s talking about Aela and Guido. In other words, this is a direct threat against our friends!

The moment I heard it, I stepped forward to truly roast, toast, ghost, and post the messenger this time around but was prevented once again by Julius. What’s more, Julius took it a step further and gave the order to accept the deal.

“They will only go in search of another method to destroy Guido and Aela if we turn them down. In which case, accepting is for the better.”

“Maybe it is, but I wanted to roast, toast, ghost, and post that damn nasty messenger!” I glare with contempt at Julius, who keeps his composed smile in spite of my anger and puffed-out cheeks.

I wanted to make him pay by roasting, toasting, ghosting, then posting him! That said, Julius makes a fair point. It’s extremely likely the messenger would have hired someone else to assassinate Aela if we said no.

“Don’t be angry. The time will come when you can roast, toast, ghost, then post him. Besides, we should be partially grateful to that messenger. He just gave us a good reason to back Guido and Aela.”

“A good reason...?” I repeat, blinking.

“Elle Village wants Guido, a fair and just lord, to continue on as seigneur. As residents of this village, it’s only natural for us to lend our lord a hand, don’t you

think?”

That’s true. I know Aela and Guido are in a pretty tight pinch right now, but they turned down our offer of assistance, saying it’s their problem. But under these new circumstances, we have more than enough of a justification to help them out.

After all, it is no longer just their problem, but a fight to protect the peace in Elle Village!

“Hmm. When you put it like that, I have to agree. This is the optimal opportunity to roast, toast, ghost, and then post the forces opposing Aela and Guido once and for all. Mwahaha,” I cackle and proudly plant my hands on my hips. “Grand Sorceress Elle shall slap-didi-dap those ill-natured noble boneheads around until they’re on the floor begging! For I love Elle Village the most, and Elle Village loves me—” I stop in the middle of my trademark saying because something concerning edges into my thoughts. “But...is it all right for me to go visit Aela, too?”

The messenger wants us to attack Guido and Aela during the next ball. In other words, we will be infiltrating the royal capital, also known as the center of enemy territory. It will be dangerous.

“Are you capable of patiently waiting at home, Elle?”

“...If I try hard enough,” I mumble with my head down.

I’ve had problems using magic since the mass resurrection spell I cast with Aela. It’s not that I can’t use it, but I’ve lost the ability to launch off my favorite wide-area spells. I won’t be super useful in a battle.

My desire to roast, toast, ghost, then post the wicked nobles can’t be beat, but I lack the power to do it, and honestly, that makes me a deadweight.

I hate admitting it, too...

Suddenly, I hear Julius’s soft laughter above me. Then his hand pats me on the head.

“You don’t have to hold back. Let’s go together.”

His kind words give me hope. I look up at his face.

“I can go with you? Me? ...I...um...can’t fight like I used to...so are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I don’t want to be apart from you, either, Elle.”

He’s okay with it?! Woo-hoo! Now I can go help Aela, too!

“Thank you, Julius! I love you!” I exclaim and hug him. He returns my hug with a squeeze.

Sensing he’s in a mood where he might say yes to anything, I decide to bring up my other hope.

“Then, then, let me have the best moment in the spotlight! I’m gonna say my trademark phrase right before we punish the bad guys! Okay?!”

I’ll have Julius corner them and take the best part for myself!

Julius bursts out laughing after I express my ultimate wish. “You’re greedy.”

“Naturally! After all, I love Elle Village the most! And Elle Village loves me the most, for I am the grand sorceress mayor Elle! Every scene in the spotlight belongs to me!”

Julius watches me getting fired up with an adoring smile. Then he brings his face close to mine. Heat blazes in his ice-blue eyes. My breath catches in my throat. I mean, when he looks at me with those eyes...I just...

“This has been bothering me for a while, but I believe your trademark phrase has a critical error. You don’t only love Elle Village and it’s not only Elle Village that loves you the most, right?” he says and covers my mouth with a kiss.

I close my eyes and enjoy the soft touch of his lips.



AT last I’ve come to pay a visit to the Kingdom of Gaea’s royal capital.

Laurent, along with me and Julius hidden by an invisibility spell, are in a meeting with the mastermind earl behind the assassination attempt on Prince Guido. He’s the former seigneur of the region where Elle Village is located. He seems to be cut from the same cloth as his perverted messenger with his haughty, holier-than-thou personality.

Makes sense the earl would be this way with an underling like that.

The evil lord is quick to tell us his brilliant plan.

Basically, he wants Laurent to attack Guido and Aela with magic during tonight's ball. In the best-case scenario, he will kill Guido and Aela by surprise during the banquet. Even if the assassination attempt fails, the earl intends to overthrow Guido by using the attack by a righteous villager under his dominion as evidence he is an unfit ruler.

What a hackneyed plan!

It seems like a crummy scheme to me, but the evil Earl of Perverts grandly explained it with a confident smile.

After hearing the earl out, Julius and I disguise ourselves with Illusion Magic and make ourselves at home in a corner of the dance hall where the ball is being held. Laurent is standing beside the evil earl.

"I finally get to see Aela again!"

Aela hasn't arrived at the ball yet, but I should get to see her soon!

"Yes, you will... In any case, the situation she and Guido find themselves in is far worse than I thought," Julius says gravely. His blond hair has been dyed black by the illusion, transforming his appearance into something easier to blend in with a crowd.

"How so?"

"Most of the nobles attending this ball are a part of the faction opposed to Guido. From the start, the nobles in opposition to him said they were throwing this party to strengthen their ties to the prince, but they have zero interest in building a relationship with him. They are using the invitation as a pretext to catch him off guard and put him in danger."

"Wow. How did you know?"

"I picked up on their conversations with a spell. The majority of nobles in attendance are aware of the earl's plan. What's worse is that Laurent isn't the only assassin they hired to kill Guido."

"Seriously?!"

"The nobles in favor of Guido are being stalled outside the castle by some sort

of interference. I sense several dozen people pacing unhappily outside the gates.”

I look up at Julius as he speaks and see a magic circle shining in his left eye. He’s using Search.

“Then this ball is being held to set up Guido and Aela?”

“Looks that way. I can see anticipation for what is about to happen coming from every noble present. Fear as well. Fear of Guido and Aela, that is. Their magic is an anomaly in Gaea. After the war with Analia ended, the nobles came to be suspicious of people possessing powers they can’t control or defeat. Thus, they want to get rid of them. Such is the thought process of the weak.”

Another magic circle appears in Julius’s eye. I recognize it as a telepathy circle. He’s probably reading the inner workings of their minds.

Ultimately, the nobles used Guido and Aela however they wanted and are trying to get rid of them like used trash now that they serve no purpose.

Annoyed, I purse my lips.

The Demon Lord who established Analia was a monster in his own right, but so are the nobles of Gaea! They aren’t so different.

“We should let Laurent know.”

“I already sent him word through magic,” Julius says.

Laurent turns in our direction and gives a nod from where he stands some distance away at the evil earl’s side.

That was fast! Wow, is Julius useful or what!

At a single glance he grasped the full story behind this ball, too. Julius is almost so powerful it’s starting to become a turn-off!

I’m beginning to worry I won’t be able to take the spotlight. Won’t the problems take care of themselves with Julius on the scene...?

“Hey, Julius, you are going to give me the best moment, right?” I nervously check with him.

“Of course. I promised you I would,” he vows.

I stare at him, wordlessly saying with my eyes, “It’s a promise. I trust you. I know you have prepared a time slot for my speech.”

Commotion ripples through the dance hall, stealing my attention. Assuming a big player has arrived, I glance toward the doors.

“Oh, it’s Aela and Guido!” I exclaim.

Entering through the doors are Guido decked out in a fancy dark-green tailcoat, and Aela dressed in a crimson gown with lots of frills. Golem stands at their side like a sentinel ready to protect them.

I’m so happy to see the group I could dance across the hall to them!

“Elle, you can’t go talk to them yet,” Julius says with a restrained laugh.

“I-I know!”

For a second, I had the impulse to go over and say, “It’s me! Elle!” But that would crush our plans. I’m well aware of that.

“Let’s move somewhere they can’t see us. Guido might not notice, but Aela has a keen eye,” Julius recommends. We exit the hall onto the balcony and watch over the party from there.

The gathering is gorgeous from a distance, but a chill hangs in the air. I can see nobles surrounding Guido, Aela, and Golem, chatting them up with fake smiles plastered on their rouged lips as they plot their downfall.

“I wonder when they will make their move.”

“Won’t be long. They want to finish this before the group of nobles in favor of Guido notice and storm the dance hall.”

No sooner does Julius answer me than the game begins.

“You wretched witch!” an assassin roars and jumps out of the crowd.

Guido steps in front of Aela and grabs the assassin’s hand, stopping his blade from reaching her. Another assassin attacks Guido with a knife as glass shatters and guests scream. Several more assassins join in the attack.

But Golem swiftly deflects their knives and knocks them back with his unsheathed sword.

Guido glares contemptuously around the dangerous dance hall.

“I was told this party was being held so you could join my side, but it appears it’s the blatant trap it seemed like from the start. You have to do more than this pathetic attempt to kill me,” Guido says, throwing aside the assassin he caught.

He’s strong. *Wow, Guido, I think you’ve gotten stronger since last time.*

While all of this is going on, the crooked earl is pestering Laurent. I can’t hear what he is saying, but from the way he’s flapping his lips, I have no doubt it’s along the lines of “Go! Do it! It’s your turn!”

All right! It’s almost show time!

“Julius, now!” I signal. Julius nods. And then—

KA-BOOOOOOM!

An explosion shakes the air and ground. Followed by the sound of something large breaking and a powerful gust of wind.

Once the racket stops, I open my eyes, which I had closed to keep the dust out, and look up at the beautiful starry sky.

Woo-hoo! I was able to destroy the building’s ceiling just right!

Frightened by the roof being ripped off, the lords and ladies start running around like chickens with their heads chopped off. Sucks for them, for I’ve used magic to lock everyone inside.

“Why?! Why won’t the doors open?!”

Partygoers scream and yank on the doorknobs.

“If the doors are broken, then we can escape from the balcony...!”

I form a smile for the nobles who have come running straight into my clutches.

At last! At long last! My moment in the spotlight has come!

I rip off the plain outfit I was wearing as a disguise and deactivate the illusion spell.

I’m wearing a white blouse with an ascot and a deep-red skirt. My hair, which

has been dyed a dull brown by the illusion, regains its fiery red.

My bright-red twintails dance in the night breeze.

“Mwahaha! Listen and be stunned, for I am—” I stop midspeech because everyone’s wide eyes are glued to the space beside me. Their gazes are locked on...Julius and his ice-cold poker face.

“Y-You’re Julius! It’s Analia’s strongest Grand Magi, Julius!”

“Isn’t he supposed to be dead?!”

Ignoring me, everyone’s full attention is anchored on Julius.

Oh my gosh! This was supposed to be my moment!

That’s right! Julius is the most infamous Analian in Gaea!

“Hey! Julius, stand back and out of my limelight!”

“Okay.” He obediently steps behind me. However, everyone’s gaze follows him into my shadow. Grr!

“You’ve got serious nerve to ignore me! But whatever. I’ll let you off the hook this once! Empty out your ears and listen well! For I am...one of the former Four Grand Magi of Analia, Elle Falmil Gracedane! I don’t love the Demon Lord anymore, and the Demon Lord doesn’t love me, but I am the grand sorceress Elle who loves and is loved by an amazingly awesome village!” I proclaim, and get elbowed in the side by Julius.

“You left my part out,” he whispers.

So I go with the flow and add, “Also! I am the most loved by Analia’s strongest Grand Magi, Julius! Your ceiling was destroyed on my order! Furthermore, I, of course, also...also...um...well...kind of love Julius, too... Yeah, I do love him. Actually, to tell you the truth, we’re already married. Kya! Don’t make me say this in front of everyone. I’m blushing!” I simper halfway through, getting too embarrassed to finish, and start twining my fingers in front of my chest.

Sheesh! What is Julius trying to make me say? Oh no, my face is so hot.

“D-Did you hear that?! Two of Analia’s former Four Grand Magi have come to attack Gaea! Oh nooo! We’re doooooomed!” Laurent shouts like a ham actor

reading off a script.

Whoops. Julius's meddling during my speech made me stop short out of embarrassment. I have to get us back on track.

"That's right! That's exactly what's going on here! With Julius and me together, we make the strongest team in the whole world! Did you honestly believe you won the war against Analia? Oh, and on that note, we have absolutely nothing to do with Sereniel and Regulus, who are ruling New Analia! We're a different sect!"

I've tried to clear Sereniel's name just in case.

Phew. I said it all. That's one job done.

Honestly, I wanted to wreak havoc with a flashy display of explosion magic, but it's too much of a risk to use wide-area spells now... Yeah, I'm satisfied with this.

I put on a good show.

"How did you survive?! I thought you were dead, Julius, and Grand Sorceress Elle, who is the most beloved by an amazingly awesome village! You may still be alive, but as long as Aela and I are still breathing, we won't allow you to harm Gaea!"

A clear and powerful voice resonates through the dance hall.

Guido steps forward. His expression is stern, but an amused twinkle dances in his smiling eyes. Beside him, Aela grins at me as if to say I really know how to wow a crowd.

It looks like they were able to hear the whole plan from Laurent during the time I bought with my speech. The show will end once Guido forces Julius and me to withdraw.

There should be a sharp decline in anti-Guido members after having it driven home that Gaea won't stand a chance against Analia's forces in the future without Guido and Aela.

Now, come at me! I spread my arms in anticipation of Guido's slash. He raises his magic sword and—

“Agh! A magic shield...! I can’t bring down my sword!” he says, pretending to struggle to lower his sword all the way.

“Wh-What immense and terrifying magical power...!” Aela cries in a strained voice.

“I must protect Prince Guido and Lady Aela! But, nnggh, the magic pressure is too great!” overacts the sham thespian Laurent, who falls to his knees before me. And while he’s on his knees, he quickly scribbles several magic circles on the floor.

Wait, isn’t this the magic circle for time reversal that Laurent and Julius have been practicing a lot lately?

As I stand there perplexed by the changes in the script, Julius brings his lips to my ears.

“The crooked nobles here should experience a little pain to drive the lesson home. Use your favorite wide-area inferno spell to teach them a lesson.”

I stare at Julius wide-eyed. “B-But...I don’t have enough magic...”

“You do. Laurent and I came up with a special spell just for you. I promised to give you the best moment in the spotlight, didn’t I?” he says as he draws a magic circle in the air.

Hundreds of magic circles form around him. Another set appears around Laurent.

“All right, are you ready, Elle? It’s only temporary, but this is our present to you. Nomonicotte nomonicotte ein ik... Time Gate. Answer my request with this blood offering. My wisdom is absolute law.”

Julius and Laurent chant the same spell, bite their thumbs, and spill blood.

The light bursting forth from the hundreds of circles Julius drew and the dozens Laurent drew pours into me.

This is it... This is the feeling.

A nostalgic sensation suddenly returns to me. This is the long-lost magic power I thought I lost for good.

Since losing my overwhelming magic, my life in Elle Village has been peaceful and happy, but I have always felt I was missing something. After all, what I had my entire life suddenly vanished. The void hidden deep in my heart occasionally makes me sad.

But I am extremely fulfilled right now.

Is this why Laurent and Julius have been practicing so much lately? There are hundreds of different magic circles and configurations they used to pull this off. This wouldn't be possible without them working together.

"Thank you, Julius, Laurent...", I say with tears of joy threatening to spill over, and I put my right hand on my chest.

That old familiar feeling is filling my heart.

I begin forming a massive magic circle in the air that I haven't drawn in a while. It appears right over where the nobles are standing like deer in headlights. The huge magic circle fills in the space where the ceiling used to be.

Of course, this is the circle that goes to my favorite grand inferno spell. It's the ultimate imprisonment spell that I almost used when Sereniel captured me. I didn't get the chance to activate it then, but...this time I will!

"Open, Inferno Gate! My wisdom is absolute law!"

The circle shines with my incantation and magic flows from my body. But no matter how much pours out and into the circle, my supply doesn't run out.

Yes, this is it. This is the feeling.

I feel amazing!

The burning red flame pillars reaching the skies above make the dance hall brighter than midday.

"What in the world...?!"

"It's hot! It burns!"

"I can't get out!"

The lords and ladies caught in the whirlpool of flame are suffering incarceration in an Inferno Prison.

Yes, suffer. You won't die, but the heat will gradually cook you! Be grateful I chose this spell over a typical explosion-class spell that would kill you on the spot!

"Lady Elle's inferno magic is awesome..." Laurent stares up in awe at the towering flames.

"Hmm. They may be the people trying to destroy me, but I'm kind of starting to pity them," Guido says with a dry smile.

"You are too kind, Prince Guido! They are the fools trying to take your life! This is a lukewarm punishment in comparison," Golem says with a snort.

Aela giggles. "Please don't worry, Your Highness," she says, the calmest of the three. "I will heal anyone who is seriously injured. Besides, I also believe this is just the right punishment for them."

I become intoxicated by the immense flow of power necessary for casting a massive wide-area spell while I listen to our friends. Julius rests his hand on my shoulder.

"How are you feeling, Elle?"

"Amazing, obviously!" I respond with a big smile.



BACK in Elle Village, I sip tea in my favorite tea room. It's calm right now in my beloved Elle Village.

About a week has passed since our little excursion to Gaea. I had such a blast casting that wide-area spell, I'm still on cloud nine just reliving the memory.

Speaking of that day, after giving the nobles a good taste of their own medicine, we went back to our original script and withdrew after pretending to lose to Guido and Aela. Word has it that the lords who suffered a taste of my magic promptly switched to Guido's side. Including that crooked earl.

Not that I would trust them farther than I can throw them, but they shouldn't be plotting any more assassination attempts on Guido. At least not as long as they are quaking in fear of the threat posed by Analia's former Grand Magi Elle and Julius looming in the shadows.

After that night, the fight for the throne has gone predominately in Prince Guido's favor. At this rate, things should settle down for Aela and Guido soon enough. I can't wait to spend some quality time with them when it does.

"Are you thinking about last week again?" Julius asks with a laugh from his spot next to me on the couch.

"Of course! I haven't been able to cast an awesome spell like that in ages! It was only for a moment, but...I was thrilled to have my magic back at full power."

"I see. I'm glad it made you happy," Julius says with a peaceful quality to his voice. I lean my head on his shoulder. He reaches out and strokes my hair.

It tickles, but I'm pleased.

"But you know what really made me happy?" I say as I'm enjoying this peaceful moment. "That you and Laurent spent so much of your time to do something for me. Wasn't it difficult to prepare so many different magic circles?"

That was a grand spell that made use of the hardest time-space magic. It temporarily returned my magic supply to what it once was. Such a complicated spell couldn't have been easy even for the strongest sorcerer Julius and the genius sorcerer Laurent.

I crane my neck back to look up at Julius's face, and his stunning ice-blue eyes come into view.

When we first met, I thought they were cold, heartless eyes. The wintry eyes of someone who had given up on life and pushed people away. But they're different now.

Softness creases the area around those ice-blue eyes as Julius smiles lovingly at me.

"Nothing is difficult when it's for you. Every second I spend on you is supreme bliss for me."

A loving voice, a loving smile. Knowing those are both meant for me sends heat radiating through my body. I want to scream that I feel the exact same

way. I sit up and caress his cheeks.

“Hehe. You know, I feel extremely ‘free’ right now. After all, I can kiss you whenever I want to. Do you think there’s any greater ‘freedom’ than this?”

“...None,” Julius says, wrapping his arms around my back and pressing his lips against mine.

I twine my hands about his neck, angling my head to better receive his kiss. It’s a sweet, deep kiss where we seek each other.

Kisses with Julius always taste of *freedom*.

Afterword

HELLO, I'm Kazuki Karasawa.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *The Weakest Manga Villainess Wants Her Freedom!* This is a novel I originally published on Shōsetsuka ni Narō and polished up for the English release by Cross Infinite World.

The best way to describe this novel's greatest charm without spoilers is to point out how adorable the heroine Elle is! The whole time I was writing the story I kept thinking: *She's too cute, I hope she isn't too cute for readers, and Is it really okay for a girl this ridiculously cute to exist?*

What part of her is just too cute? I hesitate to give a specific answer, but if I must, then I say all of her is cute! That's just how cute she is, and so as the story progresses, the number of people who fall head over heels for her cuteness increases.

Elle is too adorable for words, but the romance doesn't really take off until the last half of the story. She's even cuter in love, so I hope you will read the story until you reach this afterword and see for yourself why everyone finds her endearing.

On that note, my love for stories about cute girls who work hard isn't limited to this novel alone, and I have published many other light novels in Japan with strong female main characters. One such title that hasn't been licensed in English yet is *Tensei Shoujo no Rirekisho* (Résumé of a reincarnated girl).

I hope you will enjoy my other series should they come out in English or even in their original Japanese form!

Thank you to everyone who helped make publishing this book possible, and to my friends and family who supported me. And a special thanks to you, dear reader, who have taken the time to read this book.

—Kazuki Karasawa



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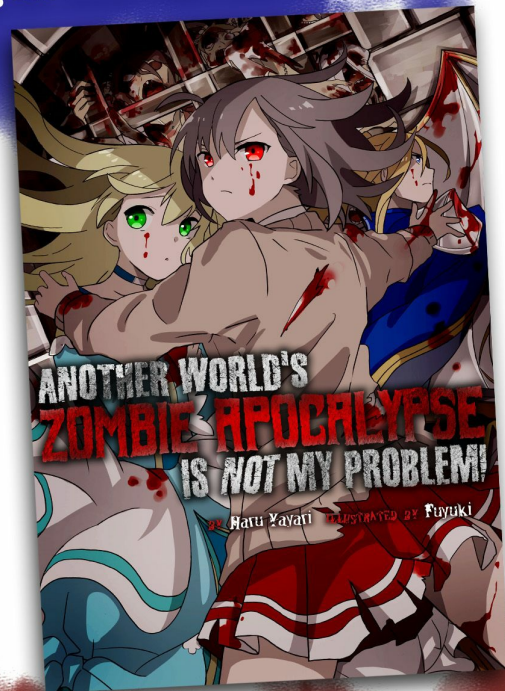
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